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THE LES PAUL BIBLE

THE STORY OF GIBSON'S GREATEST GUITAR

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- HOW THE LES PAUL STANDARD BECAME AN AMERICAN ICON
- **BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE GIBSON CUSTOM WORKSHOP**
- VINTAGE AND MODERN LES PAULS GO HEAD-TO-HEAD

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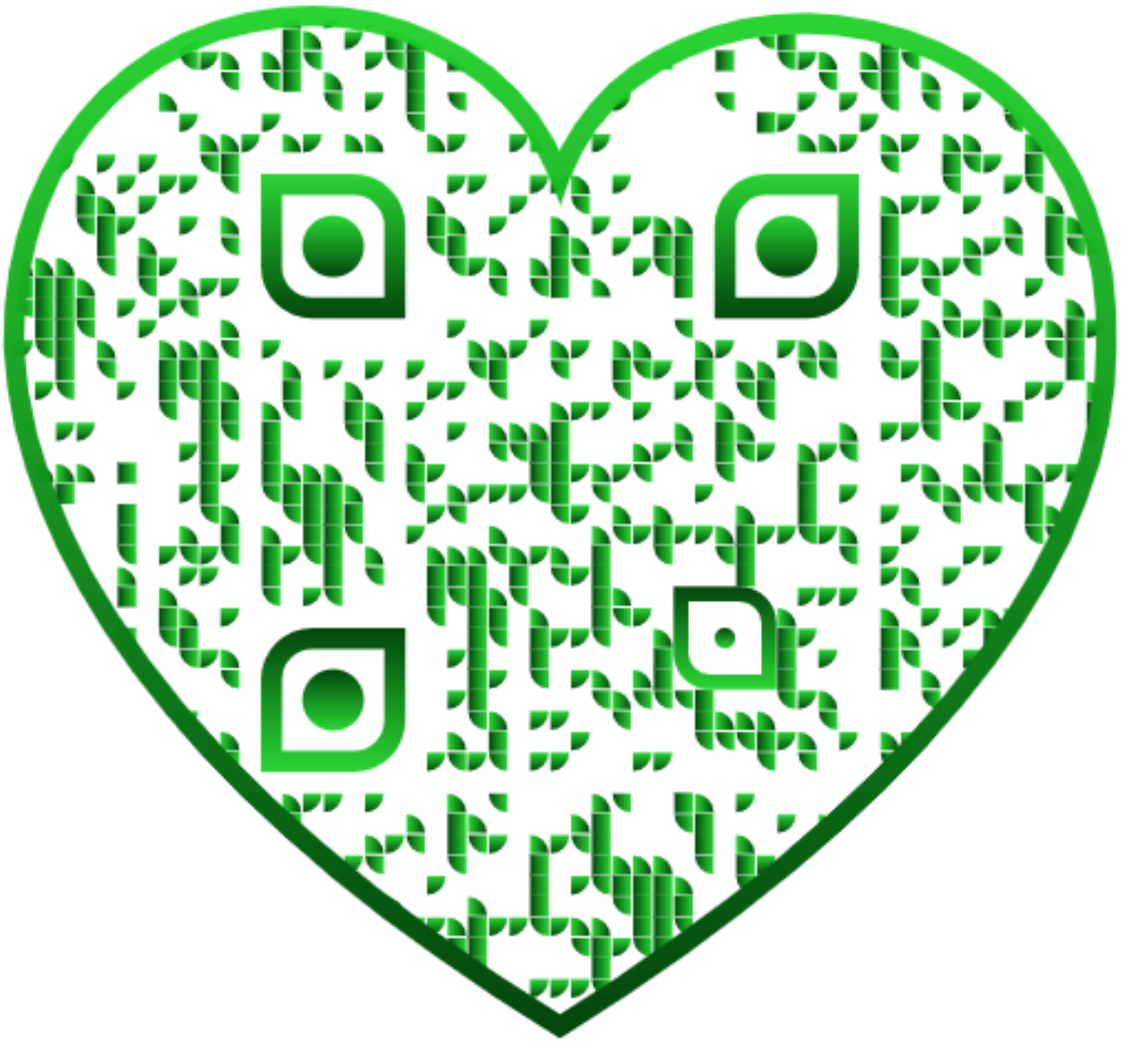

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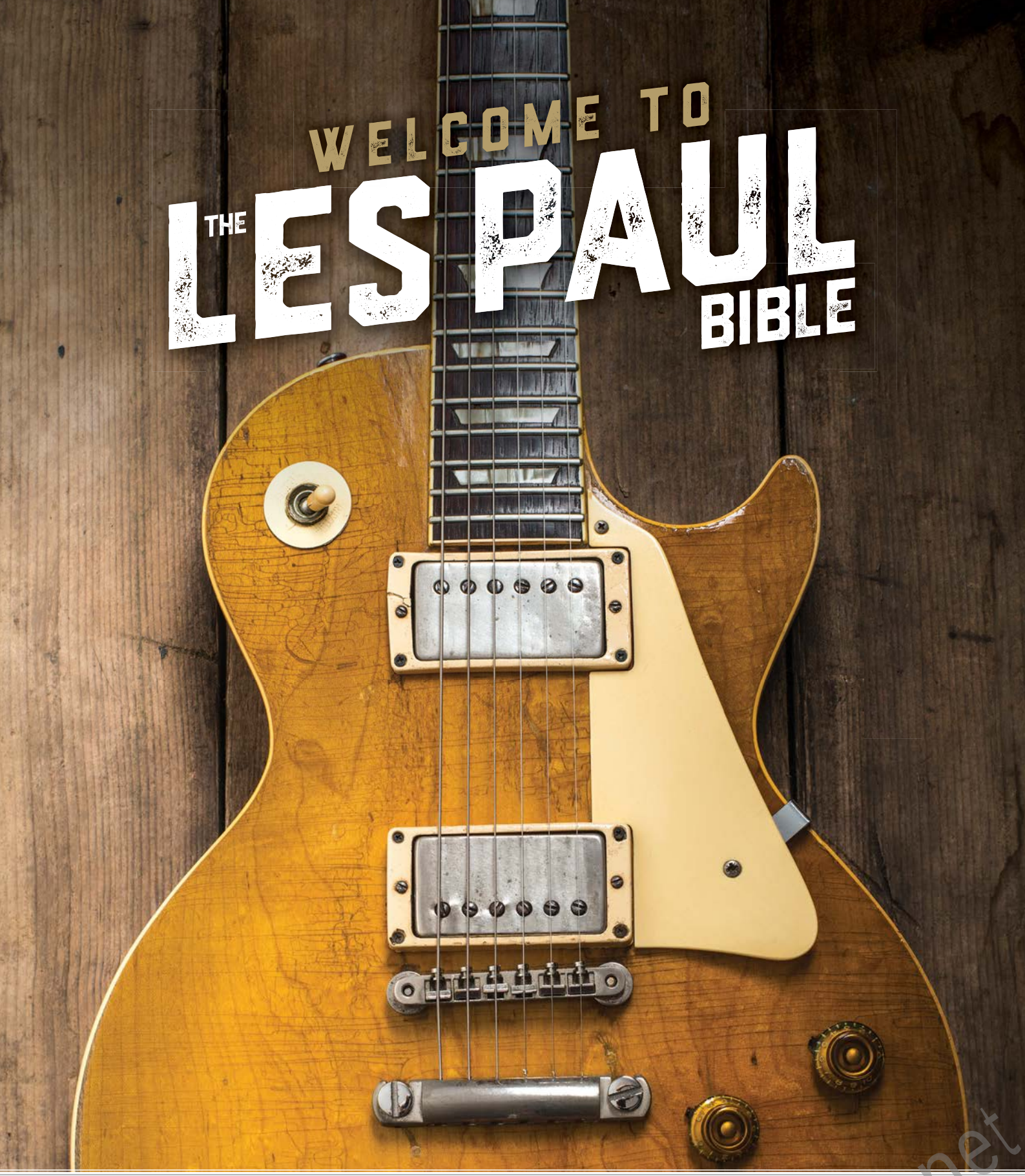

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Guitar Classics

THE LES PAUL BIBLE

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BUILDING AN ICON

The Gibson Les Paul might be one of the most iconic electric guitars of all time, but its journey to becoming the ultimate rock 'n' roll guitar wasn't as simple as its perfectly elegant design implies. Dave Hunter explores the complicated early development of Gibson's first true solidbody electric...

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The headstocks of a '54 and '57 Les Paul – the signature on the '54 has worn away completely

Rock guitarists today might be predisposed to seeing everything Gibson did between the 1890s and the early 1950s as mere steps along the path to the company's ultimate achievement: the release of the Les Paul Model. For the legendary Kalamazoo maker, however, the production of that seminal solidbody electric was almost a 'throwing-in of the towel' moment. The coercive force of a changing guitar market meant that Gibson needed an all-solid guitar, but the company's then-president Ted McCarty and other execs felt that the venture was a betrayal of the company's storied history, especially in light of the market-leading ventures in archtop electrics and flat-top acoustics that had propelled it to the top of the pile.

Despite these internal reservations however, it was the Les Paul – Gibson's elegant response to Fender's plank-bodied, utilitarian Telecaster – that would make the brand a household name all over the world.

Arching forward

In the period before and shortly after the Second World War, things were going very well for Gibson. Company founder Orville Gibson had put his name on the world's first archtop acoustics in the 1890s, and the major innovations followed in the decades afterwards – notably the invention of the truss rod in the 1920s, and Gibson being the first major guitar brand to launch a production electric guitar in 1936. From the mid-30s to the late 1940s, the company was supplying electric guitars to more professional players than any other single maker, putting their big-bodied archtops with factory-fitted pickups in the hands of everyone from Charlie Christian and Teddy Bunn, to a young BB King and a pre-Gretsch Chet Atkins.

With the 1950s looming, Gibson consolidated its strengths in the high-end electric market. In 1949 it introduced the three-pickup ES-5 – a carved-solid-top archtop with cutaway – and the single-pickup ES-175, which was revolutionary for its use of laminated woods, and indicative of an acceptance by Gibson, and the industry, that 'electric' was playing a bigger role than 'acoustic' in the sound of the amplified guitar. This was further emphasised when, in 1951, Kalamazoo bolstered the catalogue with two more carved-top electric archtops that would become standards among leading jazz artists: the L-5CES and Super 400CES.

THEY NEEDED AN ALL-SOLID GUITAR, BUT TED MCCARTY AND OTHERS FELT IT WAS A BETRAYAL OF GIBSON'S HISTORY

Unlike most of the company's top models of previous years, this elegant pair had their P-90 pickups and controls mounted right into their body's tops, and each also had a cutaway – something players were demanding more and more. By this time, although Epiphone and Gretsch had their place, as did some smaller makers such as D'Angelico, it seemed hard to find a jazz star who wasn't playing at Gibson. But then Fender happened.

Solid Sound

Let's backtrack a little. Even in the 40s, the notion of a solidbody electric guitar wasn't entirely pie in the sky – even if it was, perhaps, still the realm of outliers and tinkerers. Electro-String's Rickenbacker Spanish and Hawaiian electrics of as early as 1932 could arguably be called 'solidbody' guitars, although most had hollow centres. Newcomers Leo Fender and Doc Kauffman built a one-off solidbody in 1944, primarily to test pickup designs for their K&F operation, while arguably the first viable, if limited-production, true all-wood solidbody came

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Les Paul performing with the guitar that bore his name

from Paul Bigsby. Working from a sketch made by guitarist Merle Travis in the early-mid-40s, Bigsby – then a foreman in the machine shop of the Crocker Motorcycle Company in Los Angeles – crafted a solid maple guitar with a single pickup and a six-a-side headstock, which he completed for Travis in 1946. A handful of other Bigsby electric guitars followed, most equipped with the vibrato tailpiece that would ultimately make his name, although the guitar never went into wide production.

But even before a major solidbody Spanish-style electric guitar had hit the market, the sound of such an instrument was already establishing itself at the centre of popular music. The big-bodied archtop might still have the tone that jazzers were chasing, but another popular-music genre of the day, Western Swing, was all about the bright, cutting sound of the Hawaiian steel guitar, aka lap-steel – a solid-bodied electric of a different sort. Although the company was just an upstart, Fender had developed a great reputation between 1946 and 1950 for his roadworthy and good-sounding lap-steel guitars and amplifiers. As a result, Leo and company had a good head start in understanding 'that sound'.

Fender's solidbody guitar was prototyped in 1949 and released upon the market in 1950, as the double-pickup Broadcaster and single-pickup Esquire. The former became the Telecaster in the latter part of '51 after objections from the Gretsch company, which marketed a drum kit under the 'Broadkaster' name. Even so, this slab-bodied electric – the first of its kind to be mass-produced by an established maker – would seem no real threat to the big boys, given its derisive reception at the 1950 NAMM show and the laughter and jeers from certain sectors of the market. But the big boys wouldn't be laughing for long. It soon became apparent that many artists were recognising the advantages of a solid electric (sharp, sustaining tone; resistance to feedback; comfy ergonomics; easy repair), and the big makers figured they'd better either jump on the bandwagon, or have it roll right over them.

Les Paul – The Man

Among the tinkerers whose inventions were suddenly gaining a head of steam was one prominent artist, who in fact had brought the notion of a solid (or at least semi-solid) electric guitar to Gibson some years prior to the debut of Fender's revolutionary design.

The original Les Paul design was drastically altered in 1961, becoming what would later be called the SG

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The PAF humbucker arrived in 1957 and is still the benchmark for many tonehounds

By the early 40s Les Paul was on his way to making a name for himself as a jazz guitarist in New York City. He'd already established a life-long habit of inventing much of his own gear, but at this point his main obsession was with getting a better amplified performance from the archtop-electric guitars that were commonly available. He experimented with several materials, including some that were rather excessive, in an effort to achieve greater sustain from the instrument. "All I wanted to do was get a string to ring," Les told *The Guitar Magazine* in 2001. He even tried using a steel railroad track for the body's core, but admitted, "I couldn't imagine Gene Autry on a horse holding a piece of railroad track. So, that went out the window."

What he could imagine, though, was something following the same principle, but made of wood. After he had outlined the idea in his apartment in Queens, New York, in 1940 or '41, Les's pals at the Epiphone factory on 14th Street in Manhattan let him use the facilities during the evening to pursue his vision for the future of the guitar. Merging a length of four-by-four pine and the neck from an Epiphone guitar, he attached pickups and a bridge, and brought his solidbody guitar to life. At this point it's also worth noting that while we closely associate Epiphone with Gibson today, this was still more than a decade and a half before the latter's parent company would buy up the former.

"I took it to a bar out in Sunnyside [Queens, New York]," Paul told us, "And when I sat in with just the four-by-four they laughed at me! But when I put wings on it, they thought it was a guitar and everything was fine."

The 'wings' consisted of the sawn-off sides of an Epiphone hollowbody, attached with metal brackets. And while they made the creation eminently more guitar-like, it never shook its nickname: 'the log.' Despite his association with Epiphone, however, and the fact that the log carried an Epiphone neck and wings, Les never tried to sell it to the New York maker. "I was aiming at Gibson," he told Tony Bacon in his outstanding book *Million Dollar Les Paul* (2008). "I wasn't aiming at Epi. Gibson was the biggest in the world, and that's where I wanted to go."

> "WHEN I SAT IN WITH THE FOUR-BY-FOUR THEY LAUGHED AT ME! BUT WHEN I PUT WINGS ON IT, IT WAS ALL FINE"

Some time in the mid-1940s, therefore, Les Paul took the log to Maurice Berlin, president of Chicago Musical Instruments (CMI), which had bought out Gibson in 1944. The reaction was more laughter, which pretty much defines the universal reactions to all fledgling (if revolutionary) efforts to get an electric guitar off the ground. Les, though, was largely used to that kind of response by now; he simply went back to his business of becoming one of the music scene's busiest guitarists, as well as a pioneer of the studio recording process (see p42 for more on Les and his remarkable career). He was too busy to lose any sleep over the guitar industry's rejection of his solid-centered guitar.

Gibson Goes Solid

With Fender's plank quickly proving its viability just a few years later, however, you can just imagine Gibson's call to Les Paul in late 1950 or early '51: "Um, Mr Paul? Perhaps we should chat a little further about that 'log' contraption of yours?"

Given its deep history in the trade, and a knack for blending tradition with innovation, Gibson approached the solidbody electric differently than Fender had. It wasn't hard for the long-established company to distinguish its efforts from those of the California newcomer either, given the bolt-together, slab-bodied construction of the Fender. As Ted McCarty told guitar historian Tom Wheeler in

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Between 1954 and 1957 the Les Paul underwent significant changes as the wrapover and P-90s were swapped for PAF humbuckers and a tune-o-matic bridge with a stop tailpiece

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This killer 1959 Burst, serial number 9-1948 and also known as Snakebite, is currently owned by Joe Bonamassa

1993, in his contribution to Walter Carter's book *Gibson Guitars: 100 Years Of An American Icon*, "We didn't like the idea [of making a solidbody], in a way, because it didn't take a great deal of skill to build a plank guitar."

At first Gibson tried out prototypes with a solid-maple body, but that was too heavy, too bright, and sustained for too long. So instead the company turned back a little more toward tradition. "The original had a mahogany back with a carved maple top laminated to it," McCarty told Wheeler. "The reason we carved the top was that Fender didn't have any carving equipment, so I decided, let's do something different." Yes, Fender was very much in Gibson's sights. As we will see, however, in its rush to make a more elegant solidbody, Gibson made some errors that demonstrated that the Kalamazoo firm ought to have paid somewhat closer attention to Leo's drive for functionality first.

The popular legend has it that 'Les Paul invented Gibson's solidbody electric guitar', but a wealth of recollections from those on the scene paint a very different picture, ceding much credit to McCarty. He had joined Gibson as CEO in 1948 and was president by the time the solidbody was even a serious consideration. Although his background was in business – he had been in managerial positions at Wurlitzer for the previous 12 years – he also held an engineering degree from the University of Cincinnati, and wasn't afraid to step out of the boardroom and into the R&D department.

It seems McCarty was largely responsible for the guitar's shape and arched top – aesthetic elements that were scaled down from Gibson's large jazzboxes. The pickups were essentially the same P-90 single-coil units that Gibson had unveiled in 1946 in 'dog-ear' covers (as used on all of their archtop electrics since) and that's how they would appear on the solidbody prototype – although they would be reconfigured with new 'soapbar' covers on the production model. The four-knob control section was also ported over from some of the upscale archtop electrics, and the headstock shape and fingerboard inlays were seen elsewhere in the Gibson guitar line. Pulled together with a standard 'diamond-top' trapeze tailpiece used on several archtops, and a rocker bridge that generally accompanied Bigsby vibratos, the guitar was ready to meet its would-be endorsee. Ironically – in hindsight – wearing a Sunburst finish over a figured maple top.

"WHEN I GOT MY PRODUCTION LES PAUL I SAID, 'STOP IT! YOU'RE MAKING THE GUITARS ALL WRONG!'"

Les Paul, Meet the Les Paul

Despite all the input from Gibson's core designers, there was still a lot of Les Paul at the centre of the company's solidbody, and they also had no doubts that they wanted the star's name on the headstock. In his conversations with writer Tom Wheeler, McCarty also told the story of taking the prototype to Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania – a town about 50 miles outside New York City where Les Paul had set up his recording studio. "Les played it, and his eyes lit up. We worked all night long on a royalty contract, and when we were finished, it was only a page-and-a-half long. After that, we submitted things to Les for his advice." As with any product in early development, several more iterations followed this prototype, all evolving toward a final commercial rendition of 1952, with a flashy gold finish on its top (and sometimes, over the entire body) in place of the traditional sunburst, and – at Les's insistence – a bridge-and-tailpiece unit based on one

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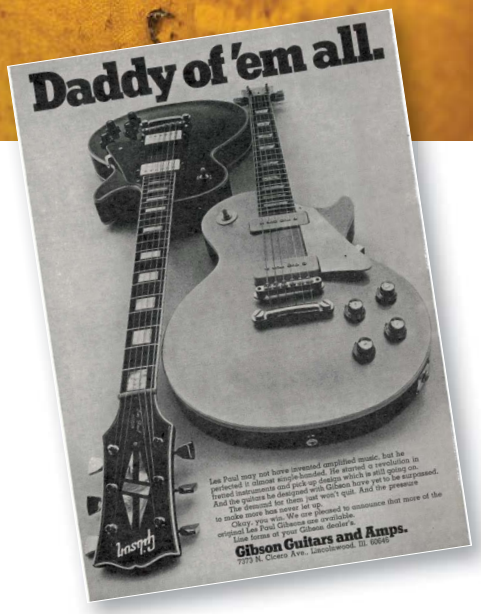


Right **Gibson brought the Les Paul back by the late 60s, but only the Custom had full-size humbuckers fitted as standard**

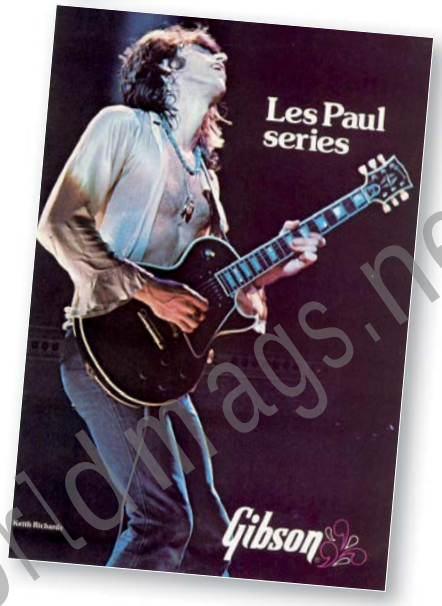
Below right **Rock stars had discovered the Les Paul magic by the time it returned**

designed by the artist himself, rather than the trapeze borrowed from Gibson's larger hollowbody archtops.

Les had concocted this bridge design back in 1945 or '46 in his neighbour's metal shop. Seen on several of his own hollowbody electrics, and on renditions of the log, he had used it for recordings and performances throughout the late 40s – including studio dates with Bing Crosby. The bridge section was fashioned from a cylindrical metal rod with six holes for string anchors, a post at either end with thumbwheel height adjustment, and long 'trapeze' rods to anchor it at the butt-end of the guitar. As used by Les, the strings were inserted through the anchor holes from the front of the bridge bar, and wrapped around the top of the bar toward the fingerboard. On the first batch of Les Pauls made throughout 1952 and into '53, however, its function was severely compromised.

"This is fucked up," Paul told us in 2001, while displaying an original example. "The first arched-top body models were incorrectly made. The tailpiece is wrong, the neck joins the body wrong: it's not on a bias, not on an angle. They thought, 'Well, I guess what Les meant was the strings are supposed to go under the bridge.' But you can't muffle the strings at the bridge. They made this wrong. When I got this guitar I said, 'Stop it! You're making the guitars all wrong!' There may be a thousand of these guitars out there.'" It's also worth noting that Les submitted his own patent application for the 'Combined Bridge and Tailpiece for Stringed Instruments' – with the strings clearly wrapping over the bar – on 9 July 1952, and it was granted on March 13 of 1956, the year the ES-225 was introduced, which also used the component.

Gibson's shipping records show that 1,716 were produced in the first year, and many in early '53 retained the same bridge. How could a well-established guitar maker like Gibson make such a fundamental gaffe on a major new model, and persist with the flaw for that



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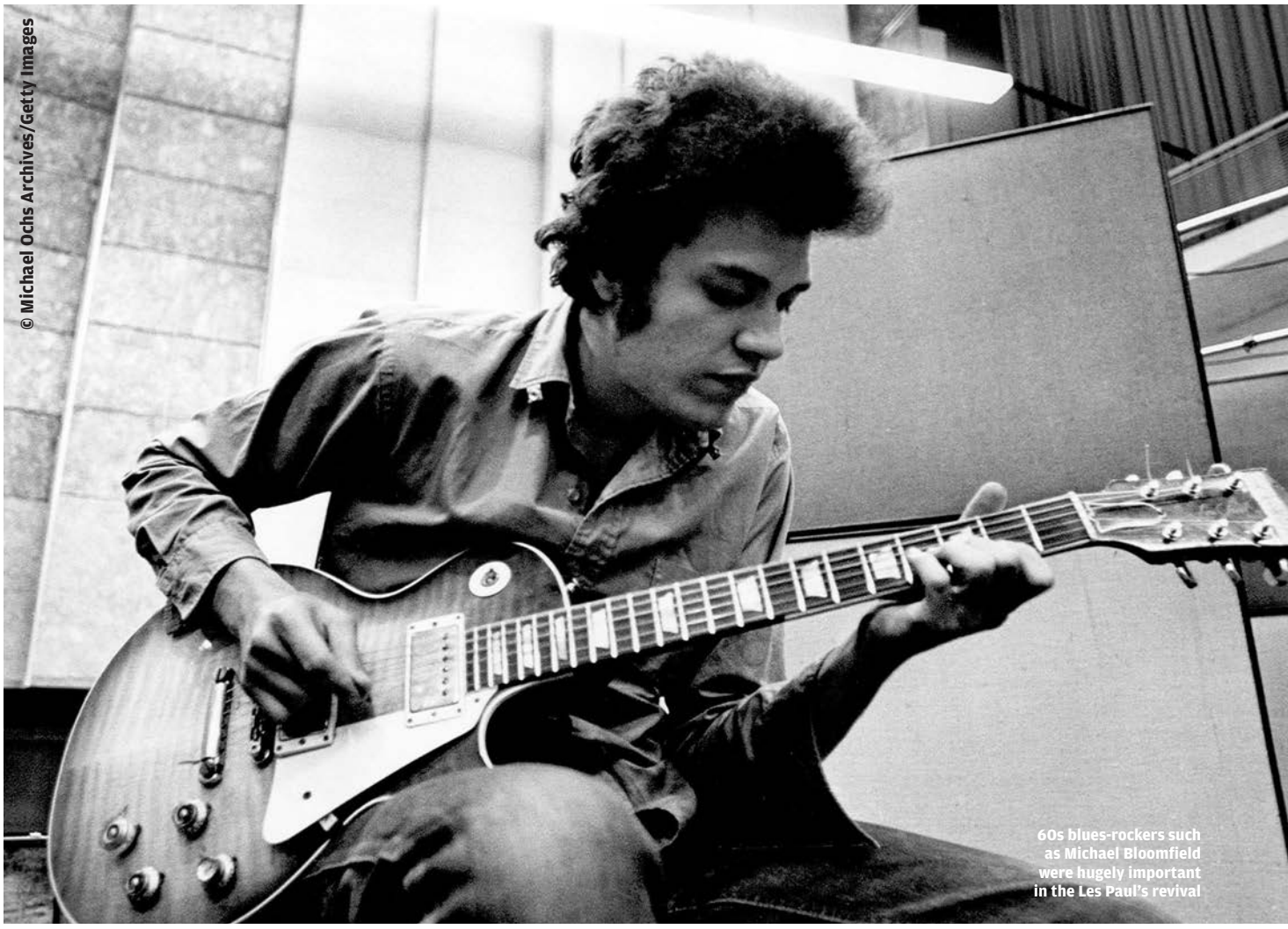
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60s blues-rockers such as Michael Bloomfield were hugely important in the Les Paul's revival

long? For one, Les himself was off on tour with Mary Ford for much of the time that the guitar was going into production, and didn't receive his sample until plenty had come off the line. From Gibson's perspective, perhaps you couldn't easily palm-mute the strings at the edge of the bridge the way that Les and some other accomplished players liked to do, but the guitar functioned, so apparently no one second-guessed the way that it was put together until Les himself got his hands on one.

In addition to the shallow neck pitch and incorrectly used tailpiece, some of the very earliest Les Paul Model guitars produced had unbound rosewood fingerboards, as opposed to the bound boards that have become the norm. The very earliest also had the P-90 in the bridge position mounted with screws running through diagonally-opposite corners of the cover and bobbin, rather than between the A and D and the G and B poles, as on the neck P-90 (and all later soapbar P-90s).

From Wraparound To Tune-o-matic

Around mid-'53, Gibson ceased producing Les Pauls with the errant 'wrap-under' bridge and added a newly devised component in its place, a simple one-piece bar arced to match the radius of the fingerboard, and anchored by studs mounted into the body top. Forever after known as the 'wrapover' or 'wraparound' bridge, it was very similar in theory, with a solid steel bar through which the strings anchored before wrapping up from the back and over the top of the curved surface that formed a single large 'saddle'.

Rather than merely standing on its end supports, however – while being anchored trapeze-style at the guitar's tail-pin like Les's patent-pending design – the new wrapover bridge had a U-shaped lug at each end which fit into the slots in each of two large steel bolts, which were threaded into studs sunk into the guitar's top. A small grub screw at the back of either end of the bridge could be tightened or loosened to adjust the depth of its seating in the bolts, providing some slight angle adjustment to compensate for the guitar's overall intonation.

AS BASIC AS IT WAS, THE WRAPOVER BRIDGE HELPED MAKE THE LES PAUL A FAR MORE VIABLE SOLIDBODY GUITAR

As basic as it was, the wrapover bridge was extremely effective, and some 65 years later it retains a long-standing reputation for enhancing resonance and sustain. This simple piece of hardware remains a favourite of many players today, and upon its arrival – alongside an improved neck angle – it helped to make the Les Paul Model a far more viable solidbody electric guitar.

Even with the relative success of this evolution in bridge design, the Les Paul would barely stand still for a full a year before Gibson sought to improve the design further, while also developing plans to expand the range to cater for more budgets and needs. Despite the misfire with the original bridge, it had quickly become apparent that the electric guitar – moreover, the solidbody electric guitar – would be a significant part of Gibson's line-up going forward. As related in Tony Bacon's *Million Dollar Les Paul*, from information compiled by Gibson's historian of the period, Julius Bellson, electric guitars

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made up 15 per cent of the company's overall sales in 1940, but that figure had risen to 65 per cent by 1953. To more directly compare solidbody and hollowbody electric models, Gibson sales records show the company shipped 1,278 ES-175 guitars in 1953, but 2,245 Les Paul Models.

For the next leap forward, McCarty put his engineering degree to work to design a bridge of his own – which he eventually patented – that had individually adjustable string saddles, as well as overall height adjustment at each end. We might take it for granted today, but the facility to individually adjust an independent bridge saddle for each string was an impressive development when it first hit the guitar world.

Unveiled in 1954, the ABR-1 – more commonly known as the tune-o-matic – has become a widely emulated phenomenon. It would eventually be one of the key ingredients to bring the Les Paul Model to its archetypal form – but before that, as it was thought of as a 'custom component,' it would be used on a truly Custom instrument.

LES'S REQUESTED SUPER-LOW FRETS EARNED EARLY LES PAUL CUSTOMS THEIR 'FRETLESS WONDER' NICKNAME

Growing The Family

Plenty has been written by guitar historians about how Les Paul originally conceived of two versions of his signature guitar, but perhaps it's best to hear it from the man himself. In a taped interview with *Gourmet Guitars* in 2009, Les spoke of meeting with CMI chairman Maurice Berlin. "The first thing he asked me was the colour, and I said 'gold'. Other people jumped up and said, 'Don't pick the colour gold, it's going to turn green on you. You're going to have a lot of problems with a gold guitar!' But the chairman of Gibson says, 'He wants gold, gold it is!' I said I was going to the men's room, and he said, 'Before you go, what's the other colour going to be, because we're going to make two of them.' I picked black."

The Les Paul Custom, dubbed the 'Black Beauty', hit the market in 1954, with some apparently released in late '53. It was loaded with the new tune-o-matic bridge (with a rendition of the wrap-around bridge used as its tailpiece), a P-90 pickup in the bridge position, and Gibson's new alnico V (aka

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This early PAF from 1957 has brushed stainless steel covers and predates the famous 'Patent Applied For' stickers

'Staple Top') pickup in the neck position. The latter was a new design by Seth Lover and Walter Fuller, at the behest of McCarty, which used sections of alnico bar magnets as pole pieces in an effort to glean more clarity from the neck setting. The guitar was dressed in an elegant all-black finish with gold hardware, and multi-ply binding around its body and larger headstock, which also bore Gibson's upmarket slash-diamond inlay, and a set of waffle-back Sealfast tuners. The neck had an ebony fingerboard, which was inlaid with large decorative blocks for position markers, along with super-low frets, at Les's request. The latter earned early Customs their 'Fretless Wonder' nickname, but can make these guitars somewhat unmanageable for rockers seeking big string bends.

Under the luxurious black-tie finish, there was one more very significant difference, too: the Custom was made entirely of mahogany, with a carved mahogany top rather than the Goldtop's carved maple top. Given the model name and the fact that the Custom, priced at $325 in 1954, debuted at a full $100 more than the current Les Paul Model with gold finish, the simpler, less-complex construction doesn't actually seem so 'custom' on the inside. The variation in timber also contributed to further slight differences in tone between the two, with a little more warmth in the Custom, and less of the Goldtop's maple-fuelled snap and clarity.

At the other end of the Gibson price list, the Les Paul Junior of 1954 was also an all-mahogany guitar, but this time with a flat-topped body, no binding whatsoever, simple dot inlays in the rosewood fingerboard, a decal headstock logo, and a single dog-ear P-90 pickup in the bridge position. The guitar was released in a basic two-tone sunburst finish that ran from black at the edges to a yellowish-amber at the centre, and hardware included the simple wrap-around bridge, and three-on-a-strip Kluson machineheads with plastic tuner buttons.

Despite the initial 'beginners and students' billing and pricing, 50s Juniors have been highly prized for their blend of raw, gnarly tone and no-nonsense functionality in the decades since their release, and while they aren't the pawnshop finds they once were, many still offer a good way into a 'real golden-age Gibson' at less than five figures. The Les Paul TV, on the other hand – out later the same year – is essentially a Junior with a light 'limed mahogany' finish intended to stand out well on that new broadcast medium, the television. Produced in fewer numbers than the sunburst Junior, they are also more collectible today.

The following year, the Les Paul Special brought two soapbar P-90s to the slab-LP platform, with other minor upgrades in the form of the four-knob control complement and a bound rosewood fingerboard with pearloid headstock logo. Given the general construction, these weren't a mile away from the top-dog Les Paul Custom, other than in the bling, the tune-o-matic bridge, the carved top, and the staple neck pickup.

Hallowed Humbuckers

The alnico V pickup had barely settled into the lineup before McCarty tasked engineers

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Lover and Fuller with designing a hum-rejecting guitar pickup. Even if the concept wasn't entirely new, no previous effort had yet achieved the simple elegance – and tonal success – that would follow Lover and Fuller's new humbucker. The first variations of the unit appeared in the form of a triple-coil humbucker, used on Gibson lap-steel guitars in 1956. When double-coil humbuckers arrived on the Goldtop Les Paul Model and black Les Paul Custom in 1957, they carried stickers that read "Patent Applied For," to warn off would-be copyists while the company awaited the patent. Pickups of the era, therefore, are given the nickname 'PAF', which applies to any pickup carrying the "Patent Applied For" sticker that Gibson humbuckers wore between late 1956/early '57 and late 1962.

Gibson's PAF humbucker turned the industry's thinking on its ear, and offered players unparalleled levels of sound and performance that set the standards for pickup design forever after. Players and collectors today (or at least, those who can afford to) are willing to pay upwards of five-figure sums just for a pair of original PAF humbuckers in good condition, and reproducing the pickups in precise detail has become virtually an industry in itself.

Although it was otherwise almost identical to its predecessor of 1956, the two humbuckers on the Goldtop of 1957 make it a very different beast, and far more valuable on today's vintage market. Fewer than 500 Goldtops with tune-o-matic bridges and humbuckers were made, so they remain among the rarest of Les Paul configurations, if not the most highly prized. To reach that zenith, as outlandish as it might seem, Gibson had merely to add a new paint job.

The Sunburst Finish

When we consider that the Les Paul of 1958 to 1960 with sunburst finish is the most valuable standard-production electric guitar of all time, it's amazing to realise that all major ingredients but one were already in place by 1957 – and it achieved that status through the introduction of a more traditional Gibson ingredient: the sunburst finish.

GIBSON'S PAF HUMBUCKER OFFERED PLAYERS UNPARALLELED LEVELS OF SOUND AND PERFORMANCE

After reaching a considerable peak of 2,245 Goldtops in 1953, according to Gibson's shipping records, production of the Les Paul Model declined every year after through the decade up to 1957. Something had to be done if the model was to survive, and McCarty and co deemed that a turn toward tradition was the way to go. In 1958, Gibson did away with the metallic finish and applied a cherry sunburst to the guitar's carved maple top, with a red hue made from aniline die on the back, sides, and back of the neck. Prior to this time, a very few Les Pauls had been made to custom-order with sunburst finishes – the sunburst being a Gibson standard since the late 1800s – but the wholesale revamp introduced the most iconic look to the guitar, one that remains archetypal today.

Even beyond the value of a different coat of paint, the collectability of sunburst 1958-60 Les Pauls today has as much or more to do with the figure of the maple top as it does with more significant playing considerations such as tone and feel. Given that the maple top was now visible beneath the finish,

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Ted McCarty's ABR-1 bridge – better known as the tune-o-matic – was a revolutionary design

Gibson's builders started putting more attention into the wood selection process, although they didn't do so right away, or very consistently, considering how much it would mean to collectors several decades later. Guitars made in 1958 tended more often to be rather plain-topped, although some do exhibit notable figuring. Plain-topped Les Pauls still emerged in 1959 and '60, although examples from these years also exhibited more dramatic figuring, and did so more consistently. Add together the quality and character of the fade, the degree to which the figured maple is striped or flamed, and the overall condition of the guitar, and you've got your value scale for vintage Bursts. Close your eyes and play the thing – and let the PAFs and that old wood do the talking – and you hear why they have remained iconic to players, too.

Slight changes over the era of the Burst to cater to industry trends saw the guitar evolving further – the move from a full and rounded 'C' neck in 1958 and '59 to a thinner profile in 1960, the addition of wider frets in 1959, and some changes in knobs and other minor details in 1960 – and certain players have their preferences for one year or another. None of these, however, would save the iconic original single-cut.

IT SEEMS INCREDIBLE THAT GIBSON EVER CANNED THE LES PAUL, BUT IN 1960 THE NUMBERS JUST WEREN'T THERE

Gone, Gone Away

Considering what we know of the Burst's value today, it seems incredible that Gibson ever considered canning the model. Back in 1960, however, the numbers just weren't there. Gibson records show that after shipping 920 Goldtops in 1956 and 598 in '57, the company only sent out 434 sunburst Les Pauls in '58. That number rose to 643 in '59, then declined to 635 in '60. Meanwhile, sales of the humbucker-loaded Les Paul Custom declined steadily from 284 guitars in 1957 to 189 in 1960. The rock world would eventually fall in love with the humbucking pickup, but it certainly hadn't happened yet.

Gibson decided that a new direction was called for, and the change was extreme. The result found the now-iconic Les Paul Standard with carved maple top, single cutaway, and sunburst finish deleted from the Gibson catalogue after 1960, replaced in '61 by a new double-cutaway design that shared only the pickups, inlays, and some of the hardware with its predecessor, but nevertheless still bore the Les Paul name.

Often referred to as the Les Paul/SG today (and known officially as the SG Standard after 1962, when Les Paul's endorsement was suspended amid his divorce from Mary Ford), the guitar would become iconic in its own right, but it simply wasn't a 'real' Les Paul any more, by any measure.

Slight Return

The notion sounds crazy today, but even by the mid-60s the lack of a single-cutaway, mahogany-maple Les Paul in the catalogue seemed pretty wacky, given the design's soaring popularity. After Eric Clapton cut his famous 'Beano' album tracks with the Bluesbreakers in 1966 (the same year, as it happens, that Ted McCarty left Gibson), everyone and their uncle was chasing that fat, dynamic Les Paul tone. Gibson eventually saw

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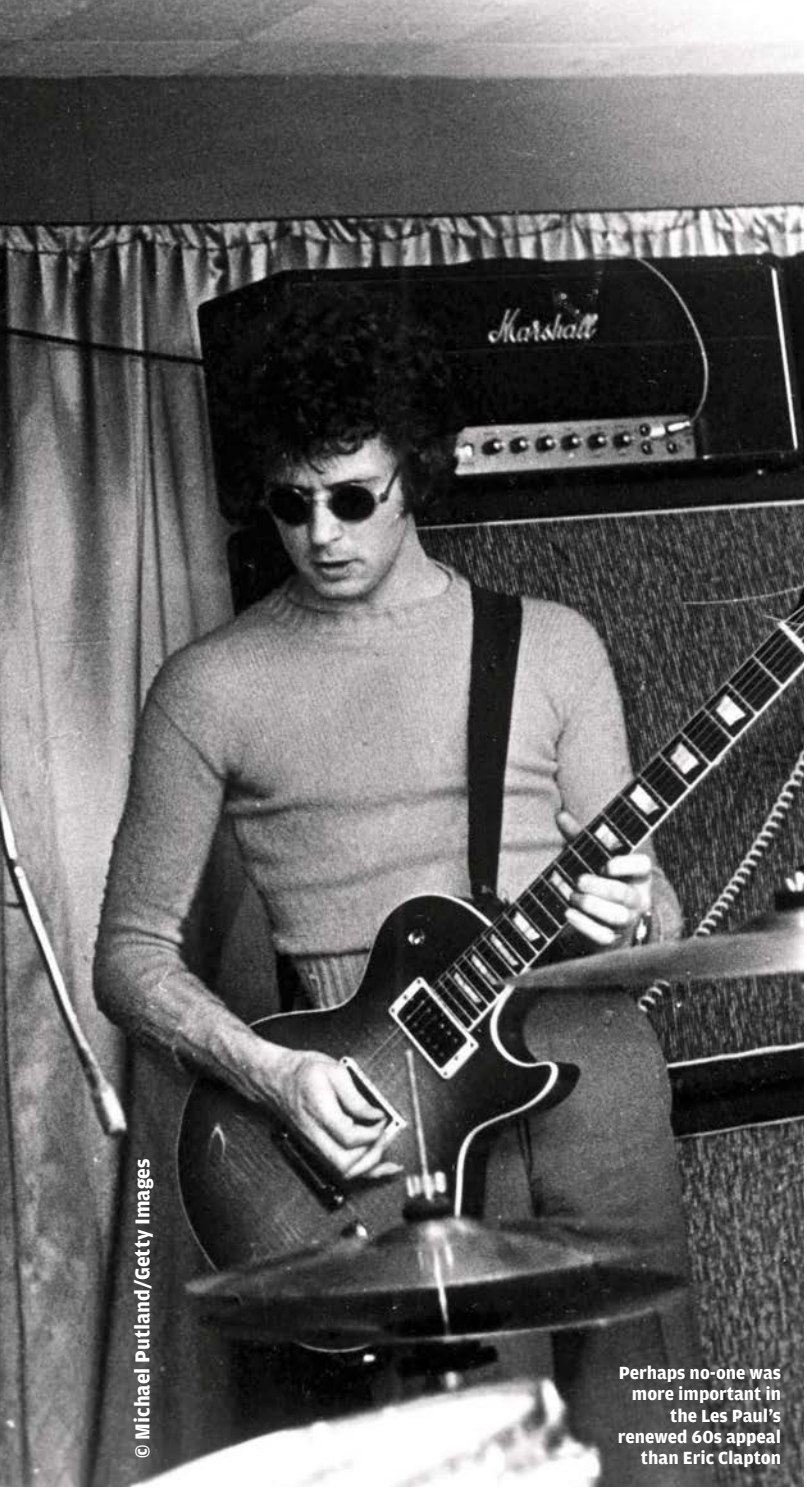

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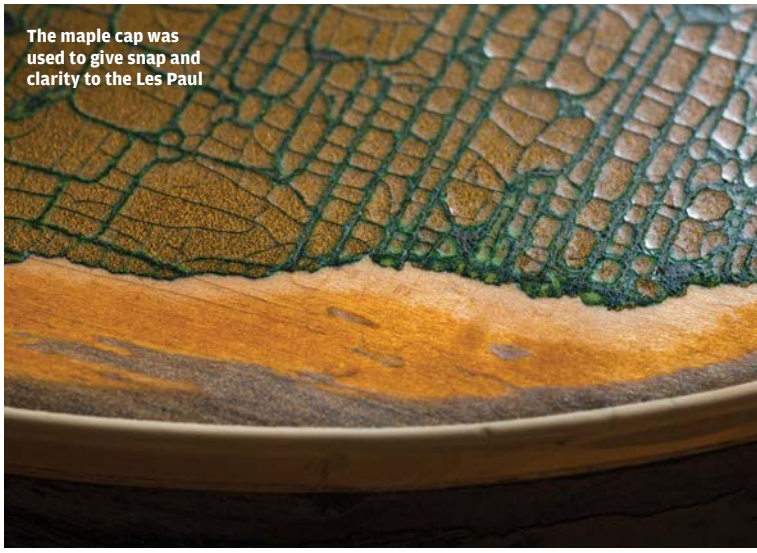
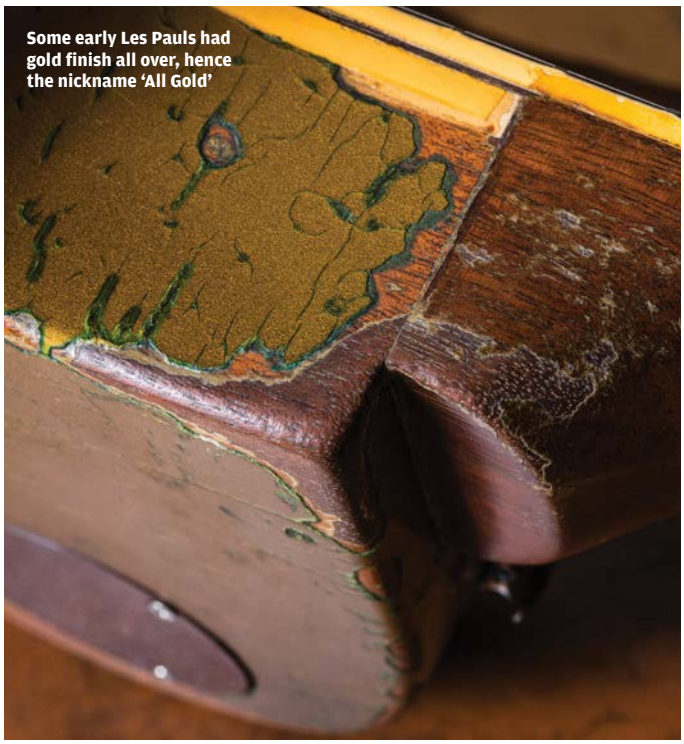
Perhaps no-one was more important in the Les Paul's renewed 60s appeal than Eric Clapton



The maple cap was used to give snap and clarity to the Les Paul



Some early Les Pauls had gold finish all over, hence the nickname 'All Gold'

sense and reintroduced the Les Paul... sort of. The Les Paul Model (aka 'Standard') was re-released in Goldtop finish with two P-90 pickups, and was essentially a 1955-56 reissue – other than in a few errant details such as the double-ring Kluson tuners and post-1960 silver inserts in the gold top-hat knobs (among a handful of other things). The humbucker returned in the Les Paul Custom of the same year, although by now the hallowed PAF had evolved into a Patent Number T-top humbucker – still a good-sounding pickup, but with nowhere near the kudos of the originals. Even so, both of these renditions have become highly collectible, and are considered one of the better routes to obtaining a true vintage Les Paul – rumours abound that many were made with leftover single-cut body and neck parts from the 50s, although we have yet to see this verified.

In 1969, Gibson introduced the Les Paul Deluxe, which carried mini-humbuckers mounted in plastic surrounds set into P-90-sized pickup routs. This year also brought the infamous volute to the guitars' neck/headstock joint, in a bid to strengthen that weak point. The design would change further in coming years, taking on a multi-piece 'sandwich' body, a three-piece neck, and a larger headstock, in addition to other bits and pieces as hardware and appointments evolved. On the corporate side of things, Gibson ownership was passed from CMI at the end of 1969 to the company that would become known as Norlin. The transition generally signals a dark period for the brand, and an era of declining standards.

Through the 70s, the Deluxe would be the Les Paul and it was a popular seller despite the lack of full-sized humbuckers, which were nevertheless retro-fitted my many players handy with a router and a soldering iron. A few humbucker-equipped Les Pauls were manufactured to special-order, but otherwise if you walked to your local Gibson dealer and purchased a Les Paul, the Deluxe is what you went home with.

The decline of Norlin-era production only helped to further mythologise the original Les Pauls of 1952 to 1960, and the scarcity of Bursts in particular has driven those guitars to the peak of collectability. In recognition of these market forces, today's Gibson company has long offered a range of reissue models alongside more contemporary iterations. The Custom Shop's recent Collector's Choice and True Historic models are arguably the best 'vintage' Les Pauls you've been able to buy since 1960, and they are certainly more affordable than vintage examples.

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BENCH TEST

Gold Standard

Chances to get your hands on one of the very first Gibson Les Pauls to leave Kalamazoo don't come along very often. When Rob Francis had the opportunity to own a '52 Goldtop, he seized it, and brought it back to Blighty. Huw Price gets up close and personal with a remarkable musical instrument...

Photography **Eleanor Jane**

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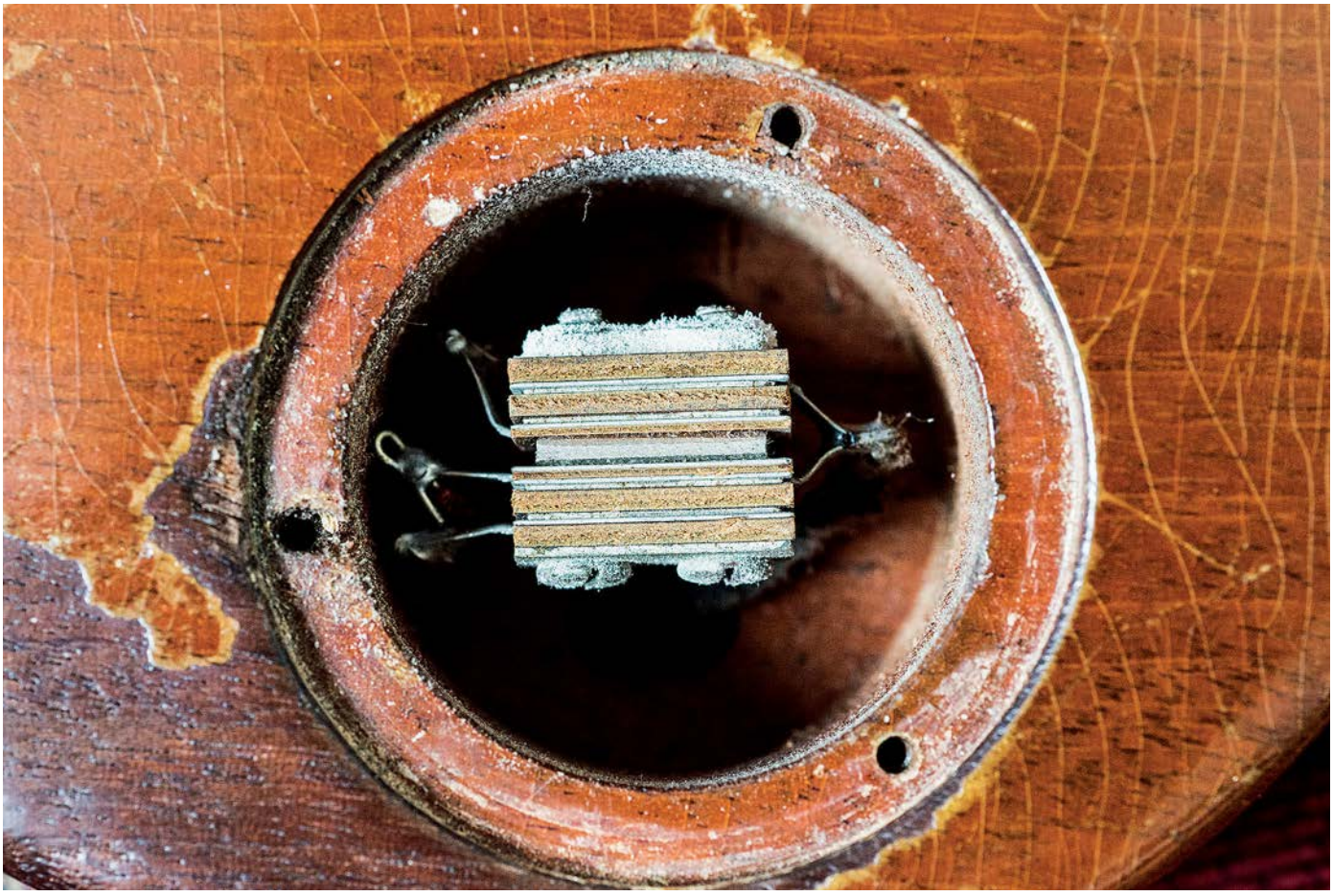

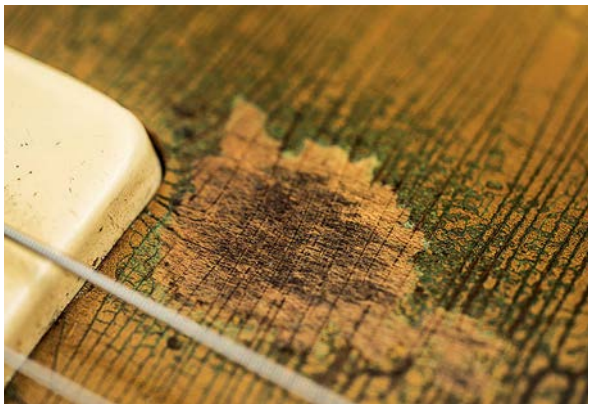

ABOVE It appears that some freehand routing was performed at the bottom of the switch cavity to make the switch fit

FAR LEFT The '52 has a shallow neck angle that makes it very difficult to play with its original tailpiece

LEFT Green verdigris is caused by copper in the gold paint oxidising

The recession of 2008 had a significant impact on every aspect of our society, and the vintage guitar market was no different – values of historic instruments tumbled for the first time in years, and it meant there were great deals to be had, if you could find them. Rob Francis was one such clever speculator, and it's remarkable to learn that he managed to pick up this original 1952 Les Paul Standard for roughly the same price that you'd pay for one of Gibson Custom's Tom Murphy aged True Historic reissues today. Having spotted the guitar for sale in a small shop in Virginia, Rob bought it and had it shipped to a friend in LA where he was able to pick it up while there on a work assignment.

A professional photographer by trade, Rob has learned to be extremely cautious with his equipment over the years, but a moment of absentmindedness could have parted him from his prize before he even got it home.

It's remarkable to learn that Rob picked up an original 1952 Les Paul Standard for roughly the same price that you'd pay for a Gibson True Historic reissue today

Rob was driving back to the airport with the Goldtop when he realised that he needed to fill his car up with gas, and so he pulled over at a service station in a rather insalubrious part of town. As the locals stocked up on snacks and drinks, Rob queued for about 15 minutes to pay for his fuel, oblivious to the fact that he'd left the car unlocked and unattended with guitar's 'Cali Girl' case sat in plain view on the back seat.

AWKWARD MARRIAGE

On reflection, he was very fortunate that an opportunistic thief didn't happen by and pilfer the guitar – or maybe the thief in question was a vintage obsessive and didn't think it was worth the trouble for a '52?

We're not knocking the Goldtop – it's an amazing guitar – but the fact is that while 50>

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The frets have been replaced, but a good job was done and the thin wire was retained

Les Pauls are some of the most collectable instruments around, not all 50s Les Pauls are considered equal by vintage collectors.

There are two features of the 1952 Les Paul that mean it's less loved than some of its brethren – a very shallow one-degree neck angle and the trapeze tailpiece. As a result, the '52 has a reputation as being more of a collector's curio than a potential workhorse instrument, and the market value reflects this.

When you consider that Gibson had been making premium guitars since the 19th century, the neck angle issue does rather beggar belief – the basic geometry of matching a neck to an archtop body would have been well understood, so why did the company deviate from tried and trusted guitar building practice? We may never know for sure, but a tentative hypothesis is that maybe Gibson and Les Paul were a little too swayed by the success of the Fender Telecaster. It's well known that Les kept a '51 Nocaster gifted to him by Leo Fender until his death, so perhaps the intent was to give the Gibson Les Paul a more Fender-like feel by levelling out the neck to body transition.

That would have been a fine idea if Gibson had paired it with a new bridge design. Instead, Les Paul insisted that his guitar should use the trapeze tailpiece/bridget that he'd devised. This worked well with the ES-295 and ES-225, but it was incompatible with that shallow neck angle.

As a result guitarists had to wrap strings under the bridge to achieve a playable action, which made palm muting very hard, and players would surely have found the protruding metal parts uncomfortable and obstructive. Moreover, the tailpiece had a tendency to slide around if the strings were hit too hard due to the insufficient downward pressure.

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The headstock logo is a clue that this is one of the earliest Les Pauls: the dot of the 'i' on the Gibson logo is touching the 'G' and its position is very low

Unbound 1952 Goldtops are definitely in the minority, and Rob's guitar has unusual features that indicate it's one of the very first Les Pauls ever made

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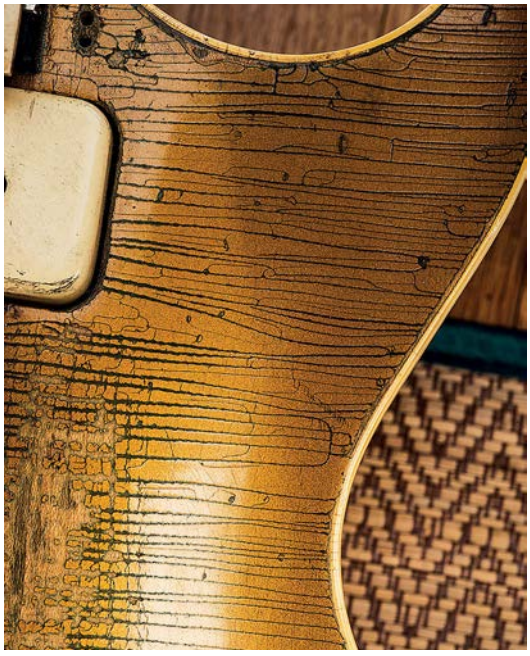
These very early Goldtops had 0.63-inch tall barrel knobs rather than the later 0.5-inch units



1952 GIBSON LES PAUL

- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with maple cap, set mahogany neck with unbound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard
- **HARDWARE**, No-line Kluson tuners with replaced buttons, aftermarket Teisco bridge & B7 Bigsby
- **ELECTRICS** Two P-90 pickups, two volumes, two tones, 3-way selector switch
- **FINISH** Metallic gold on top with clear nitrocellulose neck, back & sides
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 23.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4.64kg/10.23lbs

It's hard not to feel like Gibson was out of its comfort zone creating this guitar back in 1952. Les Paul had plenty of ideas of his own and expressed them forcefully. At the time Gibson was the guitar market leader, and you imagine that some of the skilled and experienced employees there would have been sceptical of the solidbody concept, or even regarded Les as an interloper. While we doubt that anyone was trying to undermine or sabotage the first Les Paul guitar, this first incarnation's various eccentricities do suggest that it was designed by committee.

The Bigsby that now resides on the guitar is an internet find and is purportedly a late-1950s unit that was originally fitted to an ES-335

HARD ROAD

If the trapeze compromises playability, it certainly didn't dissuade the original owner from playing this guitar and much of that was done with the original tailpiece in situ. The plating has worn away across the tailpiece's top surface, and you can see marks under the bridge where the strings have cut into the metal.

Somewhere along the line, presumably when a previous owner decided to fit a Bigsby, the bridge was changed. Holes were drilled for conventional stud bushings and a wrapover tailpiece was added. This wouldn't have worked with the shallow neck angle, so the bridge base was skimmed to drop the action to a playable level. The aluminium tailpiece that came with this guitar is vintage and most likely a pre-1955 thin-eared example. As a result of the skimming, cracks have appeared in the vicinity of the intonation setscrews >

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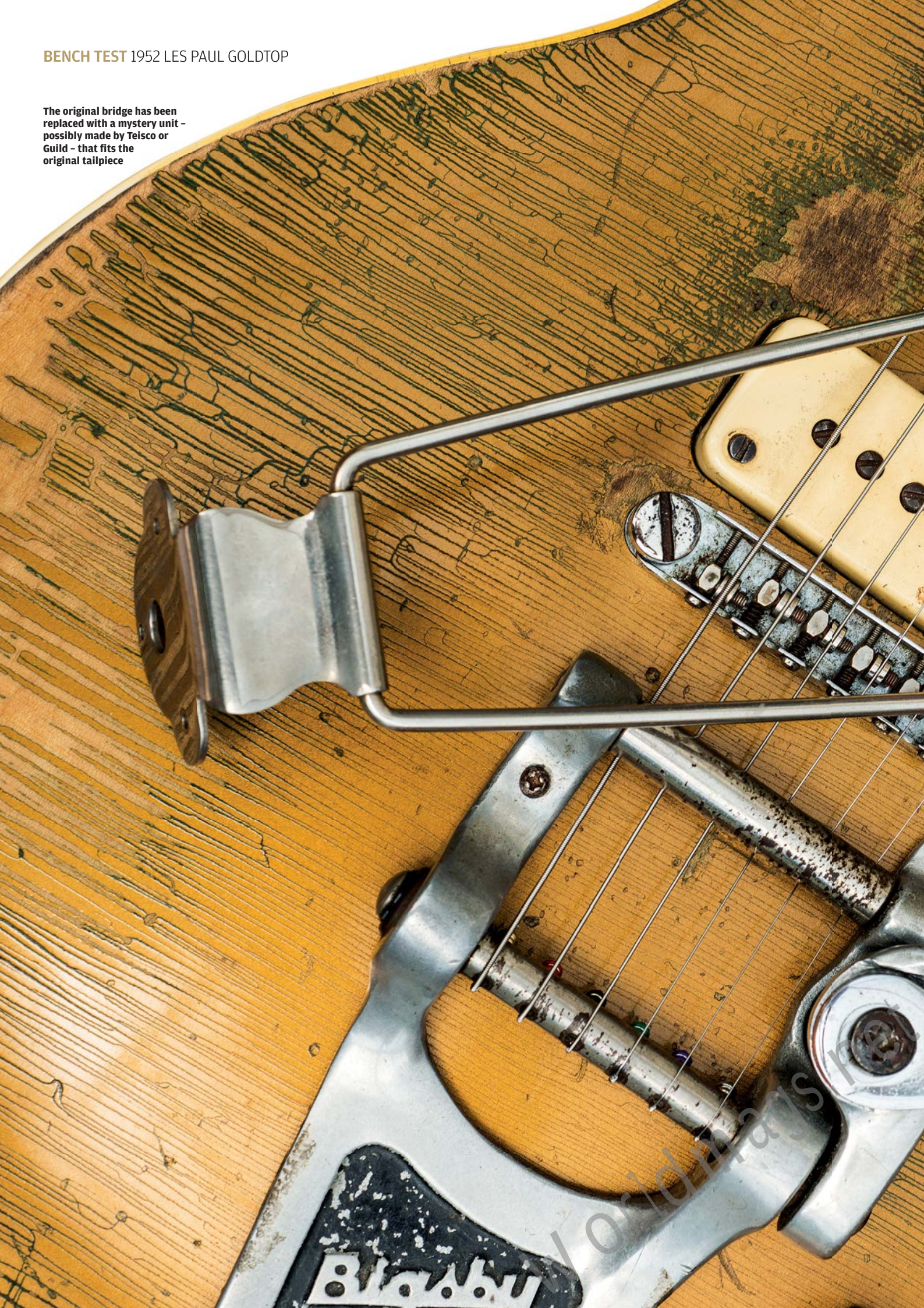

The original bridge has been replaced with a mystery unit – possibly made by Teisco or Guild – that fits the original tailpiece

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and it would be inadvisable to reinstall it now.

At first Rob used a relic'd B7 Bigsby with a wrapover tailpiece but changed to a bridge of a mystery brand (possibly a 1967 Teisco, or alternatively a Guild unit made by Muller in Germany in the 1970s) that he was able to mount using the Gibson tailpiece studs. In addition to allowing individual string intonation, the bridge's most unusual feature is side-to-side saddle adjustment. This proved handy, as whoever added the first Bigsby had mounted it off centre. Existing Bigsby holes were part of the attraction for Rob when he bought this guitar, but he had no intention of drilling any others and the Teisco's sideways saddle adjustment provided a solution for re-aligning the strings without re-locating the Bigsby. The Bigsby now residing on the guitar is another internet find and is purportedly a late 1950s original that had been fitted to an ES-335.

Rob considers this the perfect set up for his guitar, and he likes to think that Les >

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TOP **The original solder joints appear to have remained untouched**

MIDDLE **The very first Les Pauls didn't have a 'poker chip' toggle switch surround**

LEFT **The guitar has its original Kluson tuners back, but Schallers were fitted at some point**

Gibson was out of its comfort zone when creating this guitar. Les Paul had plenty of ideas of his own and expressed them forcefully

Paul would have approved. After all he was a practical and pragmatic man who generally favoured a properly functioning lash up over fine but flawed craftsmanship. Les was partial to a bit of Bigsby action, too. He also reputedly gouged into the top of his first LP prototype with a heated screwdriver in order to lower the trapeze sufficiently for top wrapping.

Les Pauls from the first year of production are not as rare as you might imagine. Supposedly only around 1,500 Les Paul Standards were made between 1958 and 1960, but company records show that Gibson sold 1,716 Goldtops in 1952 alone. Considering that the first ones didn't reach the dealers until June, that was going some. Unfortunately Gibson's records don't specify how many of those '52s had unbound necks.

However, unbound 1952 Goldtops are definitely in the minority, and Rob's guitar has some other unusual features that indicate it's one of the very first Les Pauls ever made. As such it is a particularly rare example. Examine the headstock and you'll see there is no serial number, and the Gibson logo is set low on the peghead. Look closely at the logo and check out how the low set 'kissing dot' touches the 'G'.

Now look down the neck and you'll notice the Brazilian rosewood fingerboard has no binding and the side dots are white plastic. The ones on this guitar have been touched up – presumably because the originals had almost vanished through discolouration. These very early Goldtops also had 0.63-inch tall barrel knobs rather than the later 0.5-inch knobs, and they pre-date the poker chips under the selector switch.

Telltale screw holes reveal that Schallers were fitted at some point, but the original 'no-line' Kluson tuners are back on the guitar. The tuner buttons have all been changed >

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The bridge pickup still features the original 'diagonal' screws that attach it to the guitar's body

and it's probable that hex bushings would originally have been fitted. Fortunately the original pickup covers remain and diagonal screws were used to attach the bridge pickup to the body.

You get the sense that Gibson was still trying to figure out how to build these guitars – in much the same way that the earliest Strats were clearly a work in progress. The bridge pickup screws are a case in point, because they show that Gibson hadn't settled on the best way to locate the wiring channels. On this guitar the wires vanish under the maple cap in the centre of the pickup rout, which precluded the use of body screws between the polepieces.

At the bottom of the switch cavity it looks like some freehand routing has been performed to achieve the necessary depth for the switch and the control cavity has square sides rather than the later 'clover leaf' shape. The ground wire is attached to the tailpiece rather than a bridge post and the pickup wires enter from the top rather than the sides of the cavity. All the potentiometers and both grey tiger capacitors appear to be original, while the solder joints seem untouched.

Sadly the '52 pickguard is long gone but this 1955 or '56 example isn't such a bad replacement. The giveaway regarding its lack of originality is the gap around the >

You get the sense that Gibson was still trying to figure out how to build these guitars – in the same way that the earliest Strats were clearly a work in progress

Wortham's shared

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Bigsby
PAT. APPLIED FOR
NO. D-169120

FAR LEFT The control cavity has squarer sides than the later 'clover leaf' shape

LEFT Interestingly, the guitar appears to have '666' stamped into the back of its headstock

BELOW The diagonal screw holes on the bridge pickup show how Gibson was still working out the best way to do things at this early stage

bridge pickup cover's front edge, because Gibson narrowed the spacing between the P90 single-coil pickups from 3.13 inches to three inches in 1955.

The gold finish seems very slightly thinner than on a later 1954 Goldtop. It was applied over a thin clear base coat that is exposed in the arm wear area. Some of the clear coat has worn away in this area and the wood has oxidised. Much of the gold is gone from the upper bout and in places the remaining lacquer looks like metallic shards.

Most of the verdigris is confined to the bass side of the body but it's far from excessive and while you can feel the texture of green lines under your fingers, they're not as raised as it has been on other 50s Les Paul Goldtops we've encountered. The back of the body and the neck both show extensive playwear and fairly heavy checking consistent with marks under the scratchplate and on the metal parts.

IN USE

We've encountered two other '52 Goldtops in recent years, the first being so derelict that we can't really comment on any qualities it may have had once restored. Asides from a well-repaired neck break, the other was in very clean and original condition and its neck profile made a lasting impression. Rob's '52 is equally impactful – the neck is quite different to the deeper and rounder profiles we've encountered on 1954 and 1957 Goldtops. It's

The neck is quite different those we've encountered on 1954 and 1957 Goldtops. It's surprisingly slim, and gives an overall vibe of sophistication and comfort

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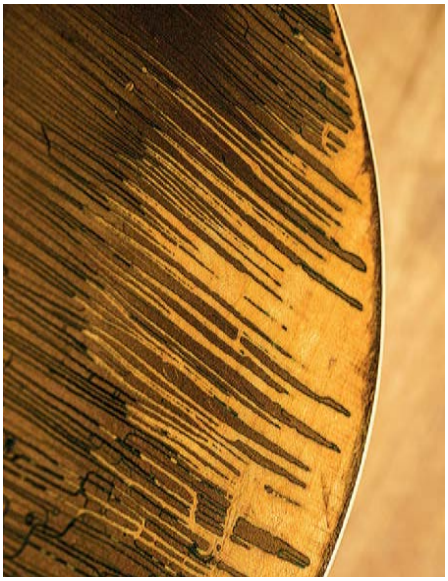

It does things Les Pauls shouldn't really do. It's exceptionally clear and defined, with powerchords having a piano-like richness

surprisingly slim, and gives an overall vibe of sophistication and comfort.

The crisply carved headstock ears curve into a soft V that graduates seamlessly into a more rounded C as you move towards the body. It's anything but clubby and while LPs from the mid-to-late 1950s can have a chunky and formidable feel, this guitar feels faster, more delicate and svelte.

Given how much this guitar was played, it's hardly surprising the nut and the frets have been changed. Fortunately a pretty decent job was made of it and we're pleased to see that jumbo wire wasn't installed. The original wire would have been quite skinny and quite possibly low, but this is medium-gauge wire and it's high enough to dig under the strings for bends and vibrato.

Unplugged, the guitar sounds very balanced with plenty of clarity and depth. Like a similarly heavy 1954 we've played it's not especially deep and bassy, but it's massively resonant and sustaining with a ringing brightness and chime.

Through an amp, this guitar does things Les Pauls shouldn't really do. It's exceptionally clear and defined, with powerchords having a piano-like richness. Note to note separation is truly exceptional, yet the transient attack has a slight softness that could be attributable to the weaker early 50s magnets. There's never even a hint of harshness. >

With no body screws between the polepieces, the wiring channel is located at the centre of the rout

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The original pickguard has been lost, but it's been replaced by one from 1955 or '56

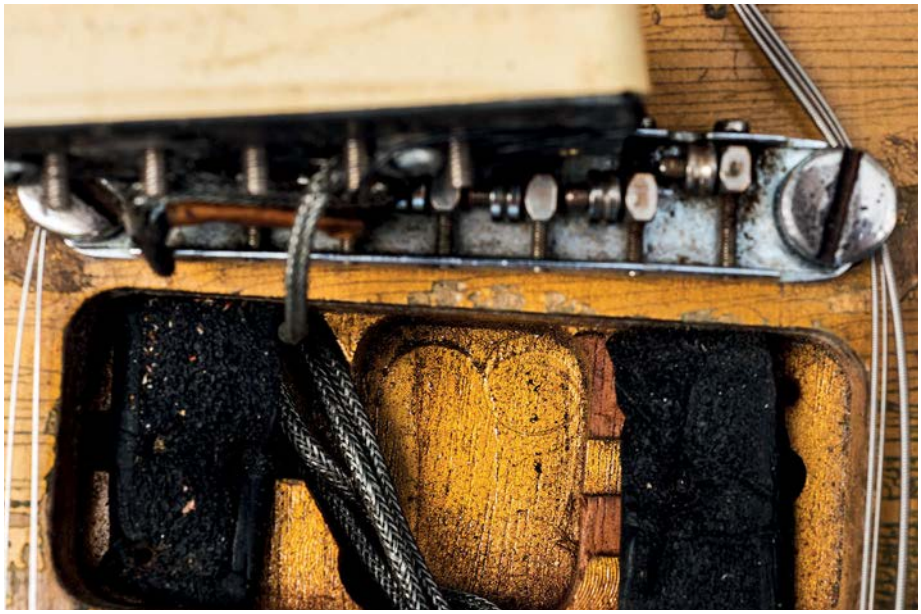
Maybe it's due to the wider pickup spacing, but the tonal contrast between the two pickups is marked. The bridge does a sweet kerrang and roar, but it also has a wiry twang on the low strings and a subtle bite in the treble. There is a hint of cocked wah in the upper mids from both pickups, and although there is some quackiness, it provides character without being too prominent.

The neck pickup is far smoother and jazzier than the bridge. Single notes have a full and rounded quality that translates to a distinctly vocal 'ooh' as you play further up the neck. The almost uncanny clean-up capability is there with both pickups from 10 to one, and the control pots have a smooth and noise free response – with the exception of a slightly scratchy neck tone control.

The in-between position produces a sublime rockabilly-meets-Chet type tone with a hi-fi clarity that compares to a DeArmond-loaded Gretsch. Roll back the bridge volume a tad and with a hint of overdrive the tone takes on a horn-like quality that would be superb for jump blues soloing and brassy stabs.

The action is perhaps a little higher than it could be, but it's such an easy guitar to play you soon stop noticing. It's a mystery why anybody considered it necessary to change the tuners, because even with vigorous Bigsby activity, the tuning remains stable.

Had 1952 Les Pauls been fitted with a different bridge, the neck angle would have worked and had there been a steeper neck angle, the tailpiece would have been fine. Since it's such a tough job to re-set a Les Paul neck, it makes sense to change the bridge and various options are now available that can turn a '52 into a fully playable instrument with low action and improved intonation. The Glaser, Crazy Pig and Mojoaxe tailpieces will all attach to an original trapeze and the mods are fully reversible. Therefore the neck angle is frankly a non-issue – yet 1952 models remain the most affordable of 1950s Les Pauls.



If we were to choose three words to describe this guitar's tone we'd go with clear, versatile and big. This is the type of guitar that never gets dull or boring because fresh tones and textures keep emerging and the neck is such a delight you simply don't want to put it down. It would be hard to choose between a '52 and a '54, if we were lucky enough to have to choose one, but on balance there's some indefinable magic in this earlier guitar's pickups that just about steals the show.

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This guitar never gets dull or boring because fresh tones and textures keep emerging, and the neck is such a delight you simply don't want to put it down

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ALL ABOUT...

LES PAUL

Lester Polsfuss was much more than the iconic guitar that came to bear his name. Les Paul was also a musical pioneer and a recording trailblazer. Huw Price examines the life of a true innovator...

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Les and his one-time wife, Mary Ford, were a musical phenomenon in the early 1950s

Les created his famous 'Log' by mashing up a solid plank of wood and a hollowbody archtop

If ever there was a figure in the guitar world who was deserving of the title 'renaissance man', it was Lester William Polsfuss. At various times during his life, Les could have listed his occupations as guitar virtuoso, radio presenter, guitar builder, audio engineer, record producer, inventor, TV star, hit-maker, studio designer, electronics engineer and hugely successful performing artist. He even came up with the idea of having a musical alter ego about 35 years before David Bowie dreamed up Ziggy Stardust.

Born in 1915, Les began playing harmonica and soon graduated to guitar. As a teenager he built a harmonica holder so he could play guitar and harmonica simultaneously, and by age 13 he was already a semi-pro country singer and guitarist.

To get heard at venues, he wired a phonograph needle to his acoustic guitar and fed the signal to a radio speaker. Then to get himself heard even wider, he built his own radio transmitter and made a recording device from a Chevrolet flywheel to cut his own discs. He also experimented using a length of rail line to improve sustain. These early recording and guitar building experiments clearly weren't to be his last.

Turning His Hand

The only thing that Les was ever purist about was sound quality, so although his heart was in jazz, he was happy to play country under as Red Hot Red and Rhubarb Red if he could earn a living from it. By 1934 he'd relocated to Chicago, and was backing up artists signed to the Decca label. The first Rhubarb Red records followed in 1936, along with a name change that stuck – Les Paul.

Forming his own trio, with Chet Atkins' brother Jim on rhythm guitar, Les and his band moved to New York in 1938. Chet Atkins recalled that a Gibson archtop given to his brother by Les became the first professional quality guitar he ever owned. Almost 40 years later, Les and Chet would team up to record the Grammy Award-winning album, *Chester & Lester*.

His passion for tinkering was nearly fatal, however, and Les once seriously electrocuted himself while experimenting at home. His injuries led to a stay in hospital, coincidentally, in the same one where jazz legend Charlie Christian was being treated for tuberculosis. Later, Les relocated to Hollywood and was drafted into the Armed Forces Radio Network. While there he performed under his own name and played for superstars such as Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters. The association with Crosby continued with Les' trio backing him on a single that hit number one in 1945.

It's probably unfair to call Les accident-prone, but a 1948 car crash almost ended his career. His right elbow couldn't be rebuilt and doctors advised amputation. Instead Les had the arm set at almost 90 degrees so he could continue playing.

Big Time Lester

With his wife and new musical partner Mary Ford, Les really hit the big time. In addition to playing guitar, Les clowned around while Mary, no slouch on guitar herself, provided lead vocals. In 1951 alone the duo sold four million records and were earning over $20,000 per week – equivalent to around $100,000 today. Their TV show ran from >

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Les was more than just a signature – his recording innovations were just as impactful as his guitar

The Les Paul Recording model was Les's 'ultimate' guitar, and featured his favoured low-impedence pickups

1953 until 1960, by which point rock 'n' roll had put paid to Les and Mary's brand of folksy light entertainment.

The duo continued touring, but divorced in 1964 and Leswent into semi-retirement. Over the next few decades he recorded sporadically, but not without critical and commercial success, and was awarded his last Grammy in 2006, at the grand old age of 90.

His decades-long Monday night residency at Fat Tuesdays in Manhattan became a popular attraction for visiting guitar fans. Periodically youngsters like Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Steve Howe and his godson, Steve Miller, would pop in to jam with their hero, just as Les had done with his heroes Eddie Lang and Django Reinhardt.

Les's Other Life

In 2009, at the age of 94, Les succumbed to pneumonia complications and the music world lost a true giant. His time as a superstar may have been relatively short and the music he created is very much of its era, so why should he be regarded as such? Simply put, Les lived a parallel existence out of the spotlight and his contributions to guitar design and modern recording techniques even eclipse his achievements as an artist.

Les' name – like Kleenex and Hoover – has become synonymous with a particular product. Every guitarist knows what a Les Paul is, even if they don't know who Les Paul was. Although Les didn't invent the solidbody guitar, as some have suggested, he was certainly influential in popularising them.

Logging On

His teenage experiments with railway lines demonstrate that Les understood that a solid core was needed to promote sustain, add brightness and effectively cure feedback. However, 24 inches of solid steel rail track was clearly not a viable option.

Instead Les cut up an old Epiphone archtop body, attached a Gibson neck to a four-inch square block of pine and grafted on the body 'wings' with metal brackets. With two pickups that Les wound himself, it looked like a total lash up... but it worked!

Although Les demonstrated his musical craftsmanship with his meticulously produced recordings, he was savvy enough to realise his limitations as a luthier, and he wasn't about to start a guitar company. Instead he approached Gibson in 1941 to try and sell them on the idea. He was met with ridicule and the Gibson guys referred to Les as "that weirdo and his broomstick".

Les carried on using his famous Log on stage and in the studio through the 1940s, along with a headless solid aluminium guitar he designed and built, with tuner keys protruding from the body. It looks like a cross between a Klein and a Steinberger and you can hear its distinctive tone on Somebody Loves Me recorded in 1947. Unfortunately, the design proved problematic under hot stage lights.

Then out of the blue, Les got an unexpected call. By 1952 Gibson had been shaken out of its complacency by Fender's success, and the rest is history. >

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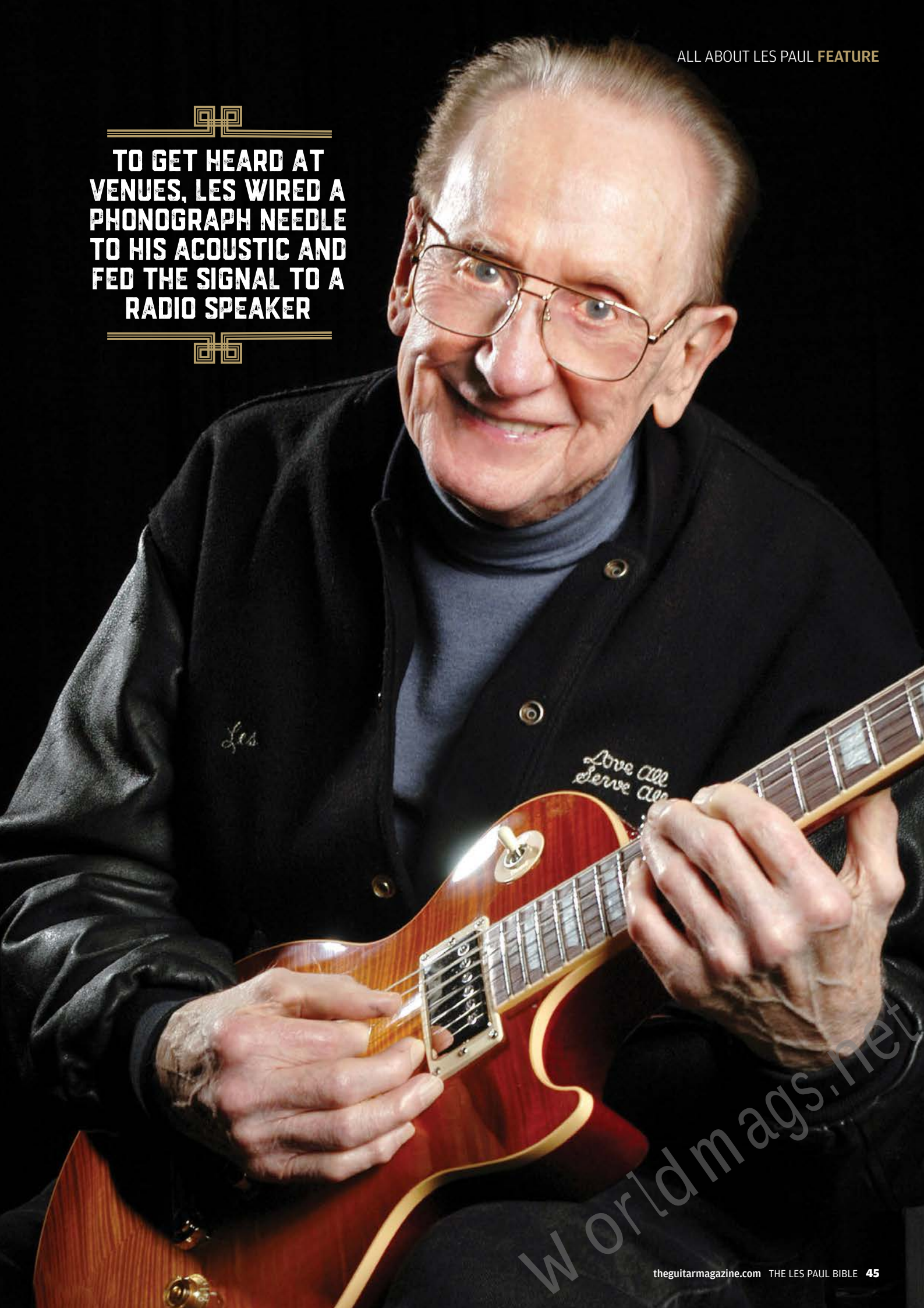
TO GET HEARD AT VENUES, LES WIRED A PHONOGRAPH NEEDLE TO HIS ACOUSTIC AND FED THE SIGNAL TO A RADIO SPEAKER



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Les continued to gig regularly until his death in August 2009

Les collaborated on the design and tested various prototypes, some of which still exist.

Even so, Gibson was remained reluctant to take advice and, contrary to Les's intentions, the Les Pauls produced in 1952 and 1953 shipped with a shallow neck angle and the strings on his own-design trapeze tailpiece wrapped the wrong way around.

The Garage Years

But Les' greatest and most lasting achievements were made in studio recording and production. Expressing his dissatisfaction with the sound of his own records to Bing Crosby, Bing suggested building his own studio. Before long Les had set up one in the garage of his house on North Curson Avenue, Hollywood. Never one to put finesse before practicality, artists were required to climb in through a window because there was no door.

He began experimenting with microphone placement, establishing the practice of close mic'ing to enhance detail and presence. This way of recording has been the industry-standard ever since. Working with acetate disk cutters rather than tape, he would record a part onto disc and then play along with the recording to create a second recording on a different disc. The basic principle of this sound-on-sound technique is known today as overdubbing.

What's more, Les discovered he could loop the original sound back off the disk to create feedback, and he varied disc speed to create harmonies, bizarre octave effects and apparently supersonic speed. The track Lover from 1948 is so bizarre that comic legend WC Fields told him, "My boy, you sound like an octopus".

Les had been experimenting with sound-on-sound since the 30s, so he naturally continued exploring this after moving over to tape. In 1952 he invented flanging, which featured on the track *Mammy's Boogie*. However multi-track recording is surely Les's most lasting innovation.

Multiple Personalities

Overdubbing on a single tape machine was basically impossible, because of the inevitable time delay caused by having separate record and playback heads. Les proposed solving the problem by merging the heads into a single unit.

Working with Ross Snyder to design an eight-track tape machine, the first multi-track recorder was built for Les by Ampex in 1957 and he ordered an eight-channel mixer from Ren Narma to go with it. Les Paul had, in effect, created the template for the modern recording studio.

HE APPROACHED GIBSON IN 1941, BUT THE GIBSON GUYS REFERRED TO LES AS "THAT WEIRDO AND HIS BROOMSTICK"

Not all his projects worked out and his advice in an interview with Greg Hofmann was, "If you work on something and it's coming to you hard, shove it in the corner". Judging by the sheer quantity of dismantled instruments and non-functioning recording equipment deposited around his home after Les died, he meant it literally.

In the same interview, published in January 1988, it's clear that Les had kept himself up to date. He offered prescient insights on synthesis and telling appraisals of hot-shots such as Eddie Van Halen, Al Di Meola and Stanley Jordan. However, his unyielding enthusiasm for low-impedance pickups remains largely unshared.

Although few listen to Les's music these days, his association with Gibson ensures his name will never be forgotten, and many of the recording techniques and practices he pioneered are just as relevant in the modern digital world as they were in the analogue era. Not bad for a lad from Waukesha, Wisconsin.

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BENCH TEST

Television Transmitter

The TV Model was Gibson's response to Fender's Telecaster – a simplified classic. Huw Price takes a look at a near-mint '56 example

Although most of us probably call these guitars Les Paul Juniors, strictly speaking this is a Les Paul TV Model – as it says on the headstock. The Junior designation was reserved for guitars with cherry or sunburst finishes. A recent conversation with renowned guitar restorer Clive Brown provided a fascinating insight when he pointed out something that's blindingly obvious but often goes unnoticed: in the early 50s, Gibson was worried about the Telecaster, and its response to competition from Fender was the TV Model with its opaque blonde finish and single-ply black pickguard. The TV was, by Gibson standards, a simplified solidbody that was quicker and cheaper to build. Perhaps the clue is in the name – Fender had the Tele, so Gibson came up with the TV.

Even those who are accustomed to handling vintage guitars might find this one out of the ordinary. Naturally, guitar shops have to cover their backsides in their descriptions, but when Lucky Fret Music describes this 1956 Les Paul TV Model as having 'only very minor dings', it could almost be accused of overstating the amount of battle damage it sports.

Perhaps the clue is in the name – Fender had the Tele, so Gibson came up with the TV Model

We can find just a few superficial lacquer chips and some tiny dents. There is a speck of wood showing on the corner of the heel, but that was probably a buff through done at the factory, because this guitar can't have been used enough for it to be play wear.

It's a 60-year-old instrument that looks and plays as if it just left the factory. The only signs of its age are the way the lacquer has sunk into the wood and a few small areas of lacquer checking. It doesn't even have >

Although we all call them TV Juniors, this guitar's correct model designation is given on the headstock

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The back of the neck looks lighter because the way Gibson lacquered the guitars meant that the headstock and heel got a few extra coats than the neck

the musty smell of a guitar that has been case-bound for over half a century. If we didn't know better, we'd think it was one of the best pieces ever to have emerged from Gibson's Custom Shop.

There is much debate about how Gibson executed the TV finish and how surviving examples differ from when they were new. With some guitars, you can pop off the pickguard to find an area of finish that hasn't been exposed to UV light and get a sense of how it looked originally. When we remove this pickguard we're surprised to find a darker butterscotch colour with a tan line conforming to the pickguard shape.

It seems unlikely that this could have been the original colour. UV light tends to yellow up and darken pale and clear finishes, so under normal circumstances the area under the pickguard should be lighter. As is often the case, another chat with Clive Brown clears up that issue, along with several others.

It's a 60-year-old instrument that looks and plays as if it has just left the factory

Brown says the darkening of the finish is due to a chemical reaction between the lacquer and the pickguard. He suggested lifting off one of the tuner plates to see what the colour was like underneath. Sure enough, the finish under the tuners has a fresher, yellower appearance than the surrounding

1956 LES PAUL TV MODEL

- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Solid mahogany body, set mahogany neck with Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, pearl dots and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Aluminium wrapover tailpiece, Kluson three-on-a-plate tuners
- **ELECTRICS** 1x P-90 pickup, individual volume and tone
- **SCALE LENGTH** 629mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.65kg/8.04lbs
- **FINISH** TV Yellow

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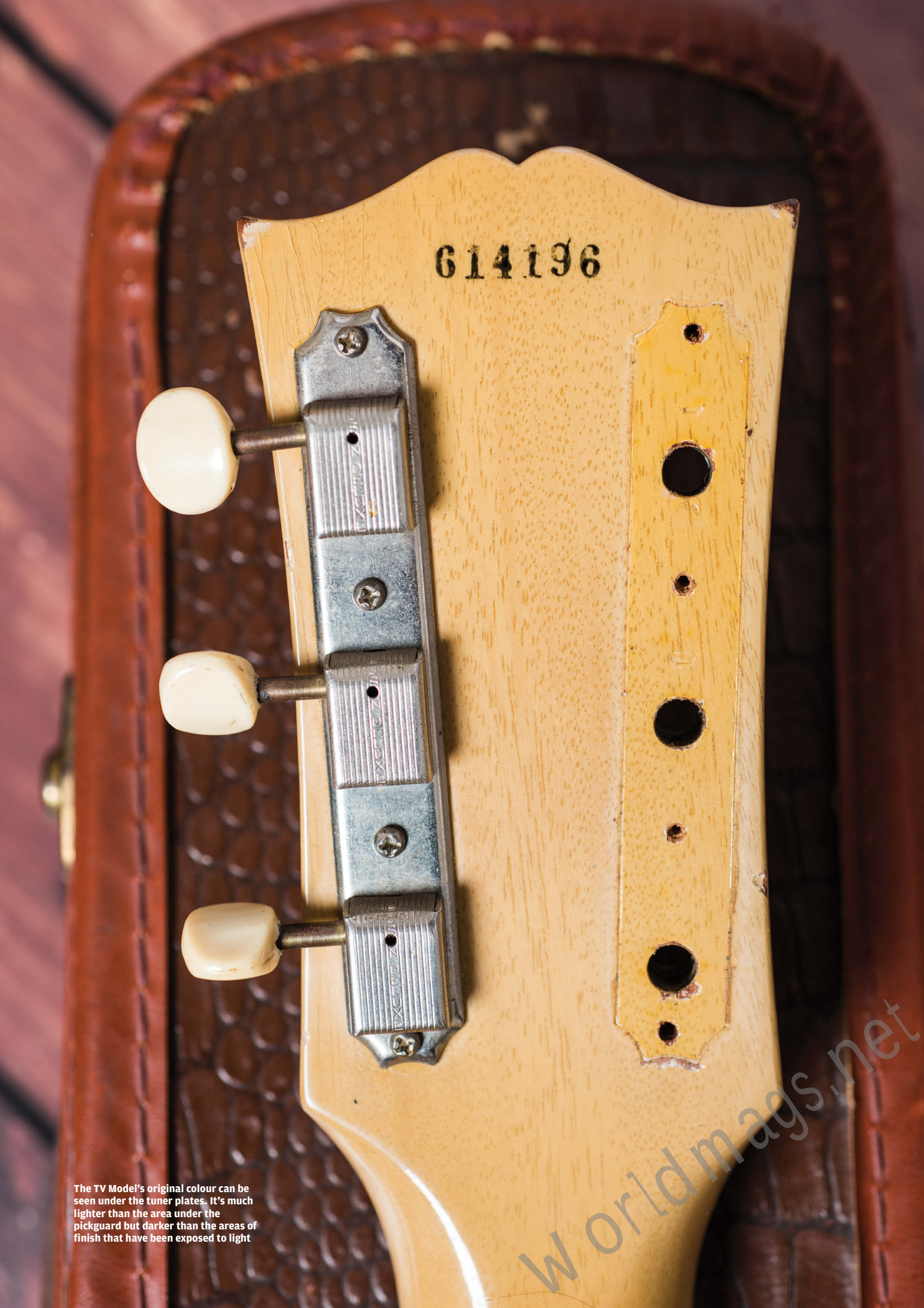
The TV Model's original colour can be seen under the tuner plates. It's much lighter than the area under the pickguard but darker than the areas of finish that have been exposed to light

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Wrapover bridges don't allow for fine intonation adjustment, but there is some wiggle room thanks to grub screws behind the bridge posts. The neck's back angle means there's a gap between the end of the neck and the body

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If we didn't know better, We'd think it was one of the best pieces ever to emerge from Gibson's Custom Shop

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It wouldn't be entirely unfair to call the mock-croc case flimsy, but it has kept this guitar safe for 60 years

areas on the headstock, which indicates the tone of the overall finish has become slightly less vibrant. Having said that, the hue does vary considerably all over the guitar – particularly where the neck transitions into the headstock and around the heel and cutaway, where it's darker. We assumed this was play wear, but again Clive set us straight.

These guitars were held by their necks while being sprayed. Once the body and headstock had been completed, guitars were hung up to spray the backs of the necks. Certain areas would have ended up with a few extra tinted lacquer coats – hence the darker shading. The control cover edges indicate it was probably hand cut and shaped for final fitting, and there's more finish darkening around the cavity ledge. This supports Brown's theory. There's also an area that is much lighter, and its paste-like appearance suggests this could be the grain filler Gibson used to create the opaque TV finish prior to applying lacquer. Brown also mentioned that Gibson sometimes brush painted some sort of emulsion over the lacquer in this area, for reasons he has never been able to ascertain.

The Les Paul TV is about raucous rock 'n' roll not feedback-free jazzy refinement

Gibson's preparation and clean-up on the TV models might not have been quite as diligent as on upper-end Les Pauls and jazz guitars. This is evident in the cutaway and around the heel, where the finish has been applied thickly over an imperfectly sanded surface. Gibson probably deemed this good enough for the kids who played these guitars, and it adds to the period charm. The controls have never been touched, so we feel no need to pull anything out and hunt for date codes. Everything looks as it should, with the correct braided pickup cable and an earlier-style paper/oil 'bumblebee' capacitor soldered to the volume control's centre lug. >

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Here we can see the original nylon nut with lacquer on its outside edges. This shows it was fitted before the guitar was sprayed

The internal wiring is all original and looks as good as it would have when it left the Gibson factory

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This guitar is in remarkable condition and is one of the finest Gibsons we've had the pleasure to play

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The darker area under the pickguard was caused by a chemical reaction between the lacquer and the plastic

We've been lucky to play a variety of 50s Les Pauls over the years, including the '52 featured on p22, as well as a '54 and '57, and the latter two were notable for having necks that were very similar. The TV's neck is nowhere near as fat as those, and it has a modern feel with a comfortable deep C profile that isn't clubby. However, the skinny frets feel as if they're from an earlier era and may divide opinion. They are almost as-new, and we have no difficulties with them.

Almost all set-neck mahogany guitars with wrapover tailpieces sound very resonant acoustically, but this TV has an extra layer of airy chime over the harmonically loaded mids and full bass. The low E and G nut slots are a tad low, making those strings buzz when they're played open, but it's an easy fix.

The more vintage guitars you get to grips with, the more common themes you notice as you move between instruments. The pickups always seem to be microphonic and, at least with 50s Gibsons, there are no areas where the control settings can't be used. This TV can go from a roar to a whisper on the volume control alone without loss of clarity.

This TV has an extra layer of airy chime over the harmonically loaded mids and full bass

In fact, something cool happens with the volume set to seven or below; that upper-harmonic thing becomes more apparent in the electrified tone. Strum or pick gently, especially with your fingers, and there's an eerie sensation that somebody's playing along with you on acoustic guitar.

At full throttle, the tone is woody and weighty with ample sustain. It's more raucous and fuzzier in the bass than a P-90-loaded Goldtop, but the TV is about rock 'n' roll not feedback-free jazzy refinement. So, whether you're picking clean arpeggios, strumming a rhythm part or hammering out a blistering blues solo, this TV delivers the goods.

Playing powerchords through a cranked tweed is one of the most thrilling experiences I've had with an electric guitar. The tuners are a bit slack, the pots need a squirt of switch cleaner and the gleaming polepiece screws of the immaculate P-90 could be adjusted to compensate for a very slightly loud G string, but they're minor issues. It's a guitar that delivers as soon as you plug it in, and it's almost effortless to play.

Imagine being a lucky American teenager given one of these for Christmas in the mid-50s. With a first axe like this, you'd have no excuse for not knuckling down to playing. TV Models might not fall into the 'beginner' category these days, but the same applies. Everything we try on this guitar sounded wonderful and, in our opinion, the TV Model is one of Gibson's greatest designs. Good luck finding a cleaner or better example.

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REMAKING HISTORY

Gibson's Nashville Custom Shop produces some of the most desirable electric guitars on the planet. We venture inside to find out why the company thinks its new True Historic series guitars are the best Les Paul reissues it has ever produced

Story **Chris Vinnicombe** | Photography **Eleanor Jane**

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LOWER
BLADE
GUARD TO
TABLE
AFTER
EACH USE
KEEP HANDS CLEAR
SAFETY FIRST
336

A Les Paul Custom getting its body binding secured in place

Back in 2015, Gibson Custom revealed its new True Historic series at the Winter NAMM show in Anaheim, California. With admission prices starting at a whopping £4,999 for the Goldtops and '58 Bursts, and rising all the way up to eight grand for a '59 with heavy ageing treatment, we're in the realms of the serious, insatiable Les Paul addict here, for whom even a recent R9 doesn't get close enough to a 50s original.

To find out whether these really are Gibson's most faithful Les Paul reissues to date or if everyone at the company has inhaled a few too many nitrocellulose fumes, we head to the Gibson Custom factory on Elm Hill Pike on the east side of the city. First, Gibson Custom's Historic program manager Edwin Wilson talks us through the manufacturing process, then we take one of the guitars home and put it through its paces...

Wood You Kindly?

Edwin Wilson: "When I'm buying maple, there are specific tops that I know that I want on True Historic Les Pauls. They're absolutely amazing, so I'll mark them, and when they come in... our designation for the standard reissue tops is R9, but the special tops will have my initials on the side also. Goldtops are plain most of the time, but there might be a little something in it. On some of the aged Goldtops we did this year, they were really curly tops underneath. When Tom [Murphy] aged the guitars, I wanted to be able to see some flame coming through, like on some of the originals.

"Our main criteria for mahogany is the size: it's gotta be a one-piece body. And then, the weight. We don't have criteria for the grain because we want to buy one-piece bodies. For the most part, I want straight grain and I want it more quartersawn-looking. I have a guy who matches the bodies and the necks so that the mahogany back takes the filler and the aniline dye colour as much like the neck as possible. The necks are all quarter-sawn mahogany. We ask the wood vendor to rotate the neck so that we get the longest section of grain right through here [the headstock transition] so that it'll have the most support here, which is what Gibson did in the 50s."

"OUR MAIN CRITERIA FOR MAHOGANY IS THE SIZE: IT'S GOTTA BE A ONE-PIECE BODY. THEN THE WEIGHT"

Stuck On Glue

EW: "We're using hide glue to glue the tops onto the mahogany backs, the neck to the body and the fingerboard to the neck. It has sound benefits, as well as making the guitar more historically accurate. Glues dry at different hardnesses. Titebond [used on regular Custom Shop instruments] dries very good and very hard, but it doesn't dry as hard or glass-like as hide glue does. When hide glue dries it's very strong and brittle, and it transfers the vibrations better." >

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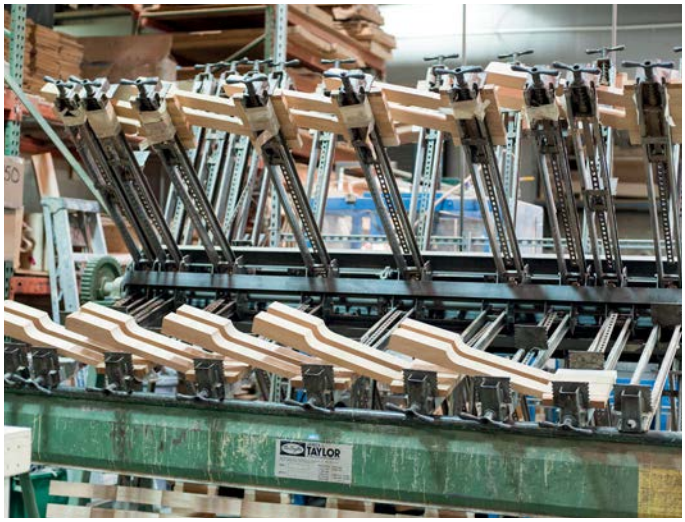

The maple cap of a Les Paul gets finished off with a hand sander

Carving A Niche

EW: "With True Historics, we changed the carving process. Now, on the True Historics, Historic Select, Collectors Choice and Artist Model guitars, they'll go through and get the first carve. The body will go face down, they'll rout the back, they'll do the rout for the toggle switch, then they'll flip it over, and it rotates on the fixture, then they'll do the initial rout for the neck, then they'll do the rout for the binding and the cutaway, then they'll do the carving. The carving is based on 3D-scanned data that we've taken from original guitars. In the 50s, it's all over the place! When we get an original guitar, what we're measuring is something that's been machined, sanded, finished, everything. What we would really need would be one that's carved with nothing else done to it. That doesn't exist. So when we approach it, we're scanning a guitar that's already had all this done, and we're trying to recreate that shape as closely as possible.

"They'll do the first process all the way up to the carve, then it'll go over to our binding department, they'll go rout it for the rest of the binding, they'll bind the guitar then it'll come back. Then it has the second carving process. We've eliminated the slack belt operation for this, because regardless of how good a slack belter is, they have an almost impossible job. They have two things they have to accomplish: number one is to get all of the carving marks from the cutters off the body. Number two is, they have to maintain that original carve shape. When it's the machine doing it, we can compensate for that.

THE CARVING IS BASED ON 3D-SCANNED DATA FROM ORIGINAL GUITARS. IN THE 50S, IT'S ALL OVER THE PLACE!

"It's not a reflection on any individual, but when Gibson was making guitars [in the 1950s] you're talking about a section of the United States where the main industry in that area was furniture, so you had woodworkers there. When a woodworker went to get a job at a guitar factory, he was a woodworker; he didn't come from McDonald's! The people that come to work at Gibson these days are typically younger and they have to learn the skills. Our customer will go, 'I understand all that, but I want the top like this'. This is how we get you the top like this."

To The Wire

EW: "On original Les Pauls, the fretwire started out very narrow, medium height, then it went bigger. The original fretwire on '59s was about 0.046 to 0.050 inches tall and 0.094 to 0.096 inches wide. For many years, that's the size that we used on reissues. But on True Historic, we changed the height. >

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Les Pauls with their freshly glued necks clamped in place to set

The one thing that you notice on every old guitar that comes in that hasn't had jumbo frets put in over the binding is that the frets have been dressed down; they're somewhere between 0.033 and 0.036 inches tall, the width is still there, but when you feel the guitar and you play the guitar, the binding is rolled and all that and you don't feel the fret ends on the guitar. Now we start out with 0.036-inch tall fretwire, then the guitars get Plekked and they get finished out, so some of them are 0.034, some are 0.036.

"In 1999, Eric Johnson called and he wanted a Les Paul Custom, with very specific details. I'm working on the guitar and he called and said, 'I have my own fretwire that I want to use'. I'd never really had a long conversation about fretwire with anybody like that! But he was explaining to me about this company that he had found. Their annealing process for the metal was like they used to do in the old days. So we tried some of their fretwire and it really was a different animal. We changed from that company because they were really small and they were going to go out of business. We used Jescar for a very long time. This year, we've changed to another company, but both use the same process and formula that this first company did."

Finishing Line

EW: "After the True Historics get sanded they'll get filled. Our aniline dye is powder, and they'll mix it with the regular filler and paint it on. It's not just for the red, we've used it on the Goldtops this year for the brown.

> **"WE WANT THE GUITARS TO LOOK LIKE AN OLD GIBSON. IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF MAKING A GUITAR LOOK BEAT-UP"**

Between reds and browns, we've got about 10 different colours that we use. Colour is one of the most difficult things for us to deal with because we can't use the lacquer that they did in the 50s, we can't use the chemicals they did in the 50s, everything's illegal! So we have to figure out a way around that. In the 50s, it looked like whatever it looked like. They weren't trying to accomplish anything at all. They didn't care what it was going to look like in 50 years' time, they were thinking about Friday and they were thinking about retirement. I guarantee that if someone went into Gibson at that time and said, 'These guitars are going to be the most awesome guitars in the world', they would have said, 'Whatever! No they're not! We're not even going to be here in 10 years!'.

"After it gets all the base coats on it, they'll sand it out and level the finish, then it'll get the top coats. The aniline dye doesn't lie on the surface, it actually floats into the different layers of lacquer, so when you sand it, it becomes airborne again. There's a brief time when that red really migrates out of the mahogany and into the lacquer. Normally, >

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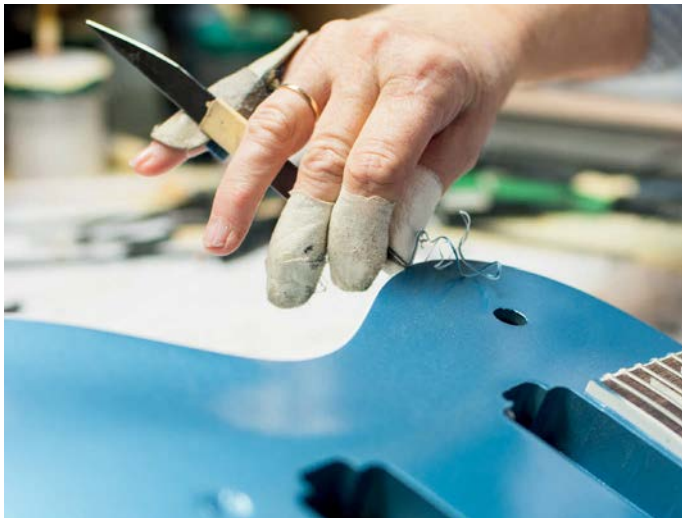

Gibson Custom's luthiers recreate the lacquer checking on a Les Paul using a razor blade

everything sits on the guitar in layers. But if you take the finish off of an old guitar, when you pull some of the clear off, you see red in there, you see all of the colour in there as it all migrates up into it. If you do that with True Historics, it's the same. The idea of getting colour on without adding material onto the guitar is huge for the overall sound of the guitar and how it rings. With this process, you're getting the colour with something that doesn't have that thickness to it, and whatever lacquer you put on is only to protect it.

"It's still nitrocellulose, but it's a different formula that dries a lot harder and a little slower. The average thickness of a Gibson finish is about 13 mil [thousandths of an inch] thick. On True Historic, the spec is 5 mil. The finish is thin on old guitars, usually 5 to 6 mil. We want the finish like on an old guitar but also, for the sound, the approach needs to be more like we're building an acoustic. The purpose is to make the guitar as it would have left Gibson – it would have been a shiny guitar but not a glossy guitar."

> "YOU CAN LOOK AT GUITARS FROM DIFFERENT ERAS AND SEE HOW THEY AGE DIFFERENTLY"

Ageing Gracefully

EW: "When you get a Fender aged guitar and you look at the finish, a lot of the time it just looks like cracked ice. That's a chemical process that they use; they buy a specific type of lacquer called airplane lacquer that dries very, very hard, then they will shoot keyboard cleaner or something on it, and they'll make it shatter. For us, since the very beginning, when we first started ageing guitars, we want the guitars to look like an old Gibson guitar. It's not just a matter of making a guitar look beat-up.

"In the very beginning, when Tom [Murphy] started ageing guitars, he developed a process. All of the lines are done one at a time, by razor, by hand. Gibson used many different lacquer manufacturers. You can look at guitars from different eras and you can see how they wear, how they check, what the finish looks like. If we're doing a guitar from the 70s, we would not do a bunch of tighter loops like on a 50s guitar, that's not what the finish is going to do.

"If you order a True Historic guitar that's aged, it's 1959, Gibson's making guitars, you want a Les Paul? You get what you get! If you wanted specific ageing on a guitar, you would order a Historic Select, because it's the exact same guitar as True Historic, except for you have the option of colour and ageing pattern."

Plastic Surgery

EW: "For several years, I've tried to get a lot of things changed, and for 2015 it just worked >

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NIKE

A heavy set of keys gives the back of the guitar authentic-looking dings and dents

out that I was able to do it. There's a vendor that I work with, he makes a lot of hardware for us already – mainly bridges and tailpieces. This guy's really into what he's doing, and he has a long history of working with Gibson. So I got ready to do these parts and I got in touch with a friend of mine, Lou Gatanas, who is the parts guy in the US – a big vintage dealer out of New York. I bought some pieces off him, and he loaned me some because an original set of cream plastics is about $35,000! Which is very insane.

"I wanted to get the flat pieces done – the jack plate, poker chip and pickguard – and the mounting rings, pickup covers, the knobs and the toggle cap, too. I just wanted to recreate the exact same thing that happened in the 50s, which I knew would be challenging. So the first thing that we worked on was the pickup covers. I got to grips with the original covers, and then we changed the thickness of the material, because you can see the difference in the radiuses. It's not just the shape that the machine stamps the cover, it's the buffing and the sanding that happens afterwards – that's what creates the radiuses on the corners.

"OUR FOCUS IS ON PICKING UP THE PRODUCTION WHERE IT LEFT OFF IN THE OLD DAYS"

"The mounting rings are made out of butyrate, same as the bobbins and same as the knobs, so the rings are a different shape, the stand-offs are a different shape, it's got the M69 in there with part of the M missing because the ring that we had, that's the way that it was. It was a '59 ring. Some of the earlier rings, you see the M on there, but others you don't. It's just a function of the tool wearing over time. The jack plate and the toggle switch washer are punched parts now, they don't machine them, so you see some of the flashing on them, and the pickguard is machined out and it's got the saw marks on the outside.

"Dead Mint Club and all these other guys that make plastics, they use a single layer of butyrate or whatever it is, their focus is on just the colour. Our focus is on picking up the production of those parts where it left off in the old days. The colour that I used was actually on the pickguard underneath the bracket. Under the pickguard, where it hadn't seen sunlight or anything, it was still the original colour. I want our stuff to tarnish and look like an old guitar does in several years time. The other thing about the pickguard and the flat plastics is that it's all laminated acrylic, so the pickguard is six-ply, the jack plate is four-ply and the poker chip is three-ply.

"The shape of the knobs is different, but also it's got the dimple on the top. So the low point is in the middle of the knob, then it >

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Our finished Les Paul Custom after its had the full ageing treatment

comes out and there's a ridge, that's the high point, and then it drops back down to the outside edge. All of that is a function of how hot the tool is that is injecting the part, how long it sits in that tool before they can take it out, so it's the cooling process. And all of those things were things we would never have thought about, ever. But that's why there's so much variation on original parts. Then on our knobs they paint the numbers in by hand, they wipe it out, and the gold is the exact same gold we use on our Goldtops, all painted by hand. We changed the font, we changed the slash marks to make the slash marks right – we went through a lot of work!

"The toggle caps are Catalin, which is the original material that was used, and we had a difficult time finding someone to get it right. But we sent them out to a couple of different labs and had the materials tested. I want to be able to tell you definitively, 'This is this material they used', because we bought knobs, we sent them out to independent labs, we had them tested.

"When we do it, we're Gibson, we created it. It has value. Some guy might get $600 a set for rings, the next guy might get $800 for all the other parts... all that's fine and dandy, but when you put all that stuff on your guitar and try to sell it, you're not going to be able to take a $5,000 guitar and get $8-9,000 for it just because it's got these parts on it that a group of people perceive as being right. It's not going to happen."

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Historic Moments

In order to attempt to make sense of the sum of all these faithfully and meticulously crafted parts, back in the UK we took delivery of a True Historic 1956 Les Paul Goldtop. At £4,999, it's very far from cheap but in this Burst-free, non-aged guise it's the most affordable way in to the series.

Straight out of the case and into the pressure cooker of a studio session with a singer-songwriter, the True Historic excelled. Using the bridge pickup for both standard tuning slide lines and biting lead saw the guitar scythe through a busy backing track of acoustic guitar, electric piano, drums, bass and big Gretsch rhythm chords with spring reverb and tremolo.

There's something genuinely special about a good P-90 Gibson, and this guitar has it in spades – at the bridge with a touch of tweedy crunch the alnico III P-90s deliver one of the ultimate rock 'n' roll sounds, spitting out *Live At Leeds*, Keith Richards, classic Britpop and southern-rock boogie, while flipping to the neck or twin-pickup setting gives you a wonderfully fluid, vocal lead tone for anything from Green to Gilmour.

Compared to recent R6 models we've spent time with, it's hard not to agree with Edwin that the small changes have added up to a guitar with a less inhibited, more dynamic and more open voice. The palm-filling neck shape – 21mm deep at the first fret and 24mm deep at fret 12 – is tremendously comfortable, the factory set-up is perfect, and the lightly-rolled binding has nicely kickstarted a process that will only improve the way this already wonderful instrument feels as the years roll by.

THE SMALL CHANGES HAVE ADDED UP TO A GUITAR WITH A LESS INHIBITED, MORE DYNAMIC AND MORE OPEN VOICE

Compared to an original? It's impossible to beat a well-worn old Goldtop when it comes to emotive areas such as sheer vibe and desirability, but on a real-world level the True Historic's wider fretwire makes it a little easier to play, for sure, and it certainly doesn't sound 15 to 20 grand worse. At 8.5lbs, the TH is also lighter than any of the five or six original 1950s Goldtops we've played, all of which have comfortably exceeded 9lbs.

The most obsessive Les Paul enthusiasts will still argue that Brazilian rosewood is the only truly authentic material for a 1950s Les Paul fingerboard, but given the complexities of purchasing enough certified wood in the quantity required for even a limited production run, the up-charge would almost certainly send the already eye-watering price into orbit – Gibson is a very different ball game to man-in-shed who builds a couple of guitars a month!

The True Historic project has been a labour of love for Edwin Wilson, and the resulting Les Pauls are the best and most desirable that Gibson has produced since its golden era. How the bloody hell we'll scrape together the cash for one remains anybody's guess...

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BENCH TEST

Special Treatment

Huw Price finds that this played-in and wonderfully maintained Les Paul Special challenges some of the conventional wisdom on Gibson's student rebels...

Anyone buying an entry-level electric guitar might reasonably expect a lower grade of wood, pickups and hardware. However, back in the 1950s, Gibson decided to cut corners on its 'student' guitars by streamlining the production process with flat rather than carved tops, minimal binding and simpler finishes that required fewer stages on the production line. In every other respect, however, the build quality and materials were up there with the top-of-the-line models.

For instance, wrapover tailpieces were deemed perfectly good enough on the full-fat Les Paul until 1955 and P-90s remained Gibson's premium pickup until 1957. This Special has the same potentiometers and paper/oil bumblebee capacitors that were fitted in all the top-end Gibsons of the era and the neck is just some trapezoid markers and an inlaid logo away from being the same as a Les Paul Standard's. The full but fabulous feel is absolutely identical and it surely seems reasonable to say that 'budget' Gibsons of the mid-50s era were actually simplified, rather than compromised.

It's reasonable to say 'budget' Gibsons of the mid-50s were simplified, rather than compromised

This Special was made in 1956 and it's a well-played and well-preserved example that was recently shipped over from New York. The wheat-toned early TV finish has been rubbed away in the forearm area and the back of the neck, and there's copious lacquer checking, with crazed cracking rather than the more uniform lateral lines which you'll see on so many replicas.

The current owner has installed locking strap buttons and the only other non-original parts are the tuner buttons and a shim under

There's no doubt this tailpiece is original and you can see rub-through marks between grooves worn into it by the strings

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Thanks to the wear on the headstock corner, you can see the holly veneer over the mahogany

the nylon nut. Inside the control cavity, all the solder joints look original and the wiring appears to be untouched since this guitar left the Gibson factory. A headstock break was repaired back in 1974 and it can be seen to be stable, because no attempt was made to conceal the work. Under black light, everything looks exactly as an original example should.

IN USE

Everybody knows that Les Paul Juniors sound better than Specials, right? After all, there's no neck pickup to compromise the integrity of the neck joint or suck the sustain out of the strings by exerting unnecessary magnetic pull. On the evidence of this guitar, that theory has about as much credence as the well-travelled 'resonance damping Goldtop finish' hypothesis.

Even unplugged, the Special's sound is huge and loud – you're treated to sparkle and thump

It probably helps that owner Neil Ivison is a professional guitar tech because, thanks to his efforts, the playability of this Special is just about perfect. A fine-quality refret has also been carried out, with wire that's closer to late-50s Gibson spec than the skinnier stuff that would have been used circa 1956. Most would find it a practical and pragmatic upgrade for a player's grade guitar.

1956 LES PAUL TV SPECIAL

- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Solid mahogany body, set mahogany neck with bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard, pearl dots and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Aluminium wrapover tailpiece, Kluson three-on-a-plate tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two P-90 pickups, individual volume and tone, three-way pickup selector switch
- **FINISH** TV Yellow
- **SCALE LENGTH** 626mm/24 5/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21mm at first fret, 24mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37mm at nut, 50.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.4kg/7.5lbs >

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It's a Special, not a Junior – and it says so on the headstock

Solid and stable since 1974, no attempt has been made to conceal the headstock repair

The frets have been changed – and it's a change for the better

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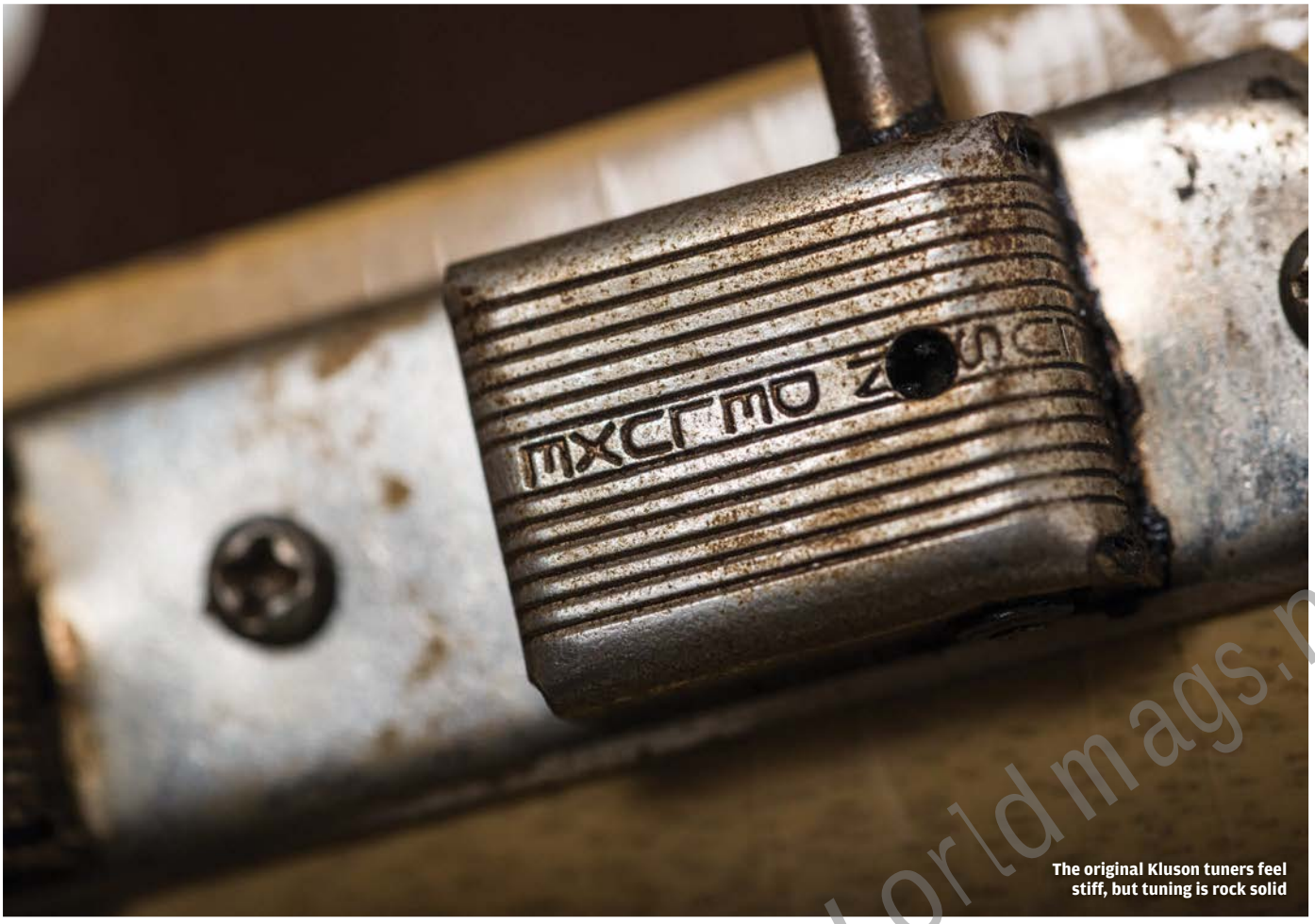
Neck wear has exposed the lighter base coats of the TV finish



The original Kluson tuners feel stiff, but tuning is rock solid

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Changed tuner buttons are among the few non-original features, but this is only really apparent under black light

Despite (or possibly because of) the absence of a Tune-o-matic bridge, this Special intonates astonishingly well and a super-slinky action combines with rock-solid stability. The played-in feel may be pure vintage, but you could gig this guitar with the realistic expectation of a trouble-free night. In fact, during the entire time we were testing it, this guitar barely needed to be retuned.

Even unplugged, the sound is huge. The frequency response reaches points above and below the norm for a solidbody, treated you to sparkle and thump. Plugged in, the Special's best feature is the full-on midrange and extraordinary note separation. When you strum a chord, you can clearly discern every note as the tone see-saws between the upper and lower mids while it sustains.

The feel is pure vintage, but you could gig this with the realistic expectation of a trouble-free night

The two pickups sound supremely balanced, yet distinct. Both have enough 'oomph' to push a valve amp into a throaty overdrive, but the bass remains clear and the treble is never anything other than sweet. The bridge's wiry bite when soloing high on the plain strings contrasts with the neck's more flutey tone and rounded attack. Switch to chords and you get woody depth and horn-like honk from the neck, with snarly but still chiming rock tones and crisper attack from the bridge.

The middle setting is perhaps the pick of the bunch, and even greater than the sum of its parts. The midrange scoops out just a touch to emphasise the bridge's ring and the neck's warmth, with a hint of phasiness and a slightly compressed response.

This setting is absolutely perfect for ditching the pick and digging in with your fingers, or exploring the smorgasbord of sounds you can dial in using the controls.

Like the best Juniors, this Special retains complete clarity when you turn down the >

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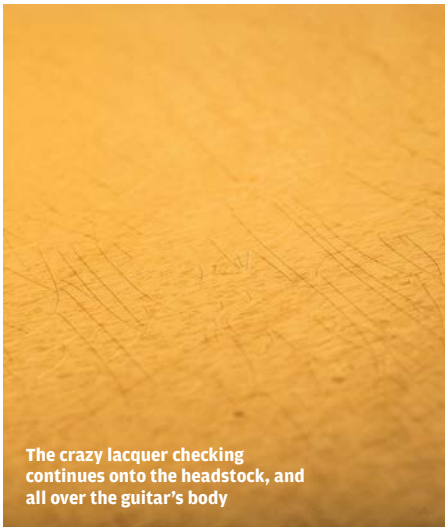
It's great to see the original poker chip and switch tip are still on the guitar – even Tom Murphy would struggle to mimic this lacquer-checking!



The crazy lacquer checking continues onto the headstock, and all over the guitar's body

volume controls, and it even manages to pull off the 'pseudo acoustic guitar' trick. You can also dial in an approximation of Clapton's 'woman' tone, with overdrive and the tone control backed-off.

While testing out this guitar, we took the opportunity to compare the Special's pickups with a variety of bespoke modern P-90s, but you may be surprised to learn that the original units sound and respond most like our set of Monty's PAF replicas. Whenever you pick up a humbucker-loaded Gibson of this era, it's a reminder that PAFs were designed simply to buck hum rather than to be a huge sonic departure from P-90s.

We've had the pleasure of playing several vintage Juniors, but it's a rare treat to get a lengthy encounter with a 50s Special.

A Special can do the Junior thing, but a Junior can only do part of the Special thing – precisely one third, in fact

Although many feel the single- and double-cutaway Juniors have slightly more visual appeal, we'd choose to own a Special. In fact, we wish we could own *this* Special – it's hard to imagine how one of these guitars could sound or play any better. And considering >

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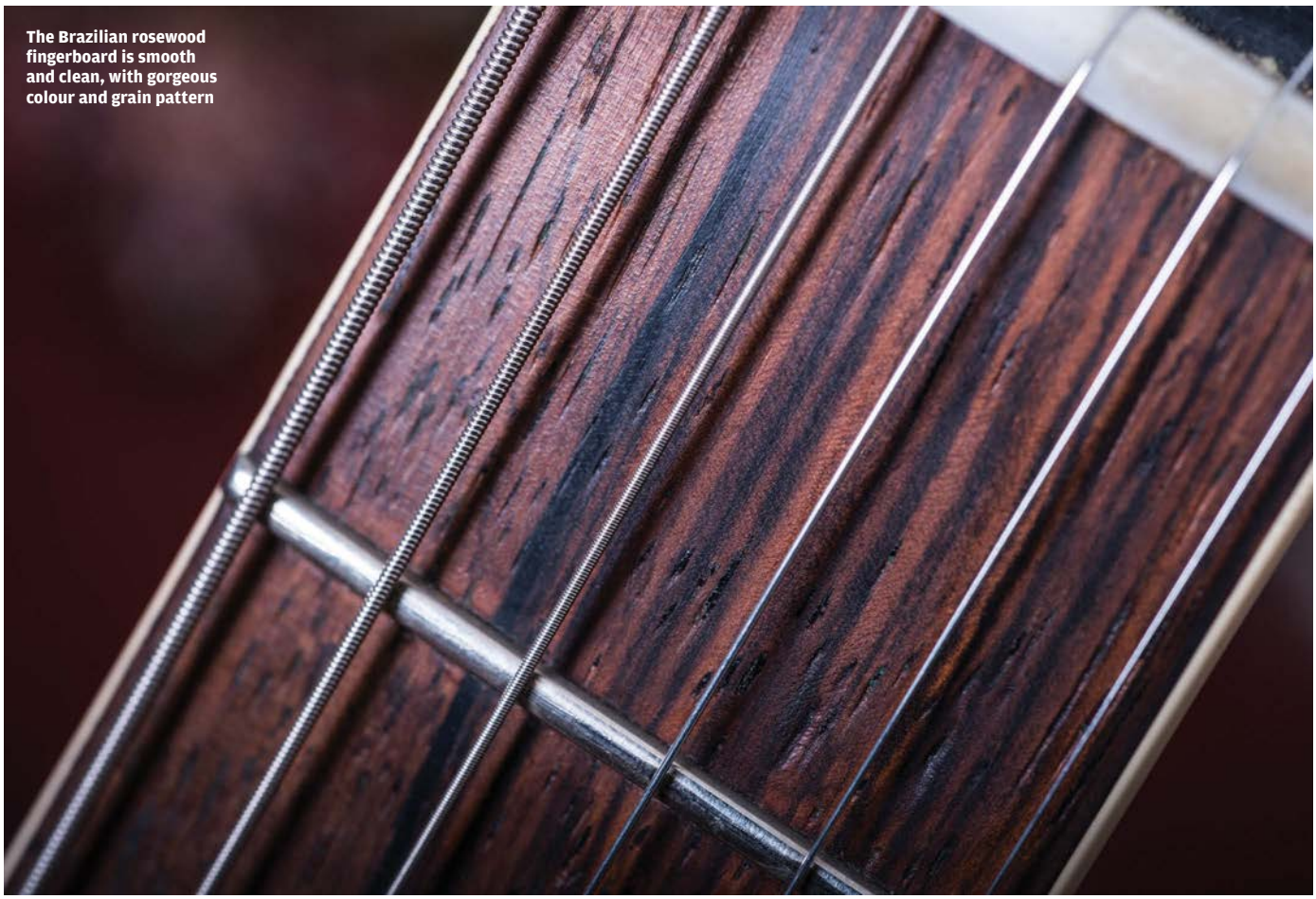

The Brazilian rosewood fingerboard is smooth and clean, with gorgeous colour and grain pattern

Arm-wear has rubbed through the finish to reveal the mahogany

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Despite the edges of the body being worn through to the mahogany, there's very little wear or buckle rash on the rear

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There's a significant ding on the cutaway horn, but other than that the front of the guitar is in fairly good condition for a guitar of its age

It's hard to imagine how one of these guitars could sound or play any better

how much more a 50s Goldtop would cost, Specials are still relatively affordable.

A Special can do the Junior thing, but a Junior can only do part of the Special thing – precisely one third of it, in fact. Granted, you can get a lot of fantastic tones from a Junior through judicious use of the controls, but there's a world of difference between a bridge P-90 with its tone control rolled back and a proper neck pickup. A 1950s Les Paul Junior might be a more commonly lusted after guitar, but this Special is, if anything, even more stunning.

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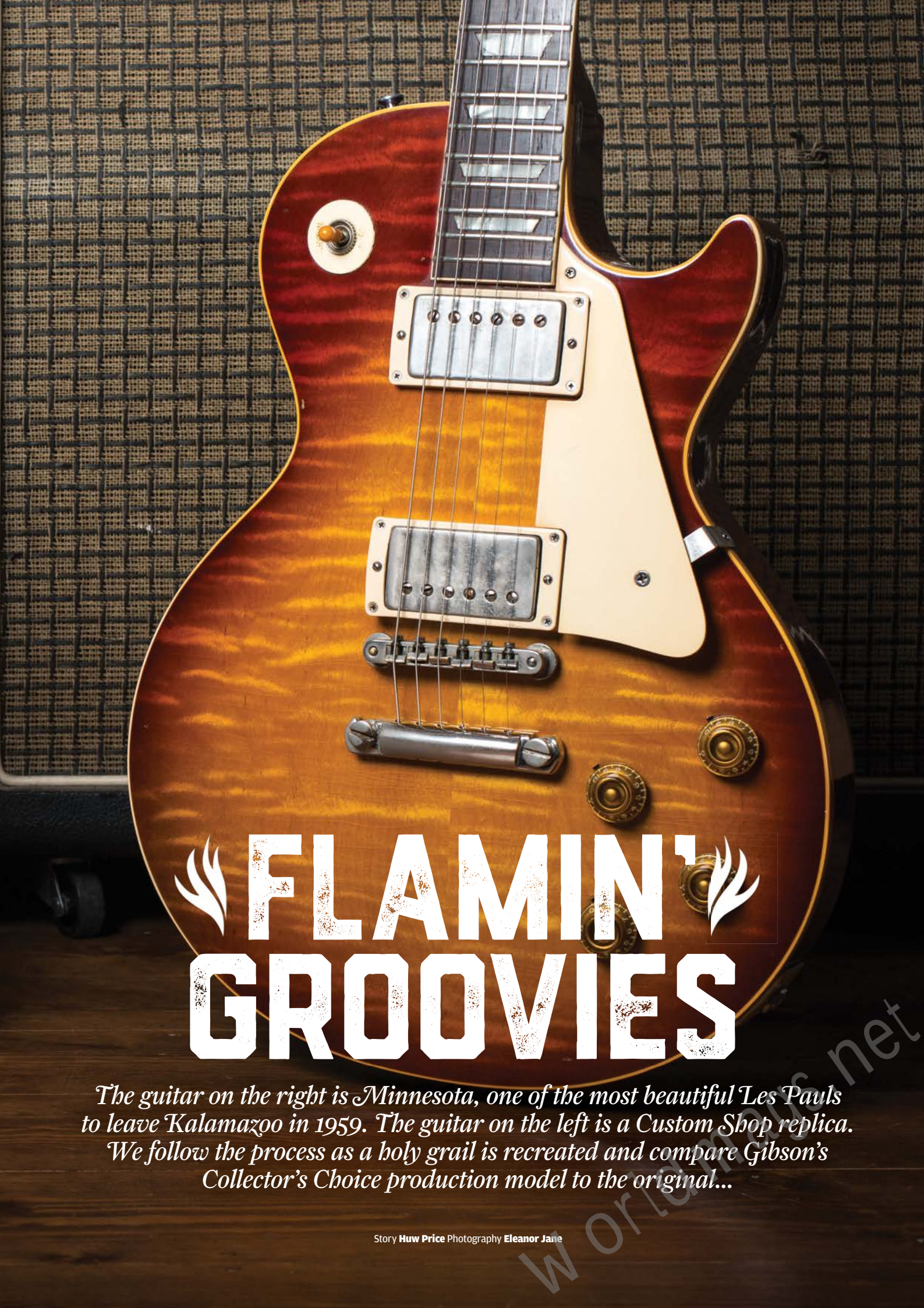

FLAMIN' GROOVIES

The guitar on the right is Minnesota, one of the most beautiful Les Pauls to leave Kalamazoo in 1959. The guitar on the left is a Custom Shop replica. We follow the process as a holy grail is recreated and compare Gibson's Collector's Choice production model to the original...

Story **Huw Price** Photography **Eleanor Jane**

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So what are these Gibson Custom Collector's Choice guitars all about? The basic premise is an ongoing series of limited editions based on specific vintage models. Some of them are big name player guitars, while others have no past profile to speak of, but are superb examples nonetheless.

The recently released Minnesota Burst is #39 in the Collector's Choice Series. It's based on an original '59 belonging to private collector Andrew Raymond – who is co-owner of Lucky Fret Music Co (formerly) Vintage Guitar Boutique in Shoreditch, London. Andrew has been a good friend to *The Guitar Magazine* for many years, and he filled in some of his guitar's backstory for us.

The original owner was a multi-instrumentalist named Dan Moline, who originally bought his Les Paul (#9 1105) from a music shop in St Cloud, Minnesota. In addition to his duties as a sales representative of Northern States Power Company, Dan had been a professional musician since 1939, and he joined a local big band called Buddy Koopman's Orchestra in 1946. Believe it or not, the band is still a going concern.

Sadly, Dan died around 1990 and ownership of the guitar passed to his son. He kept the guitar until 2001, when it was acquired by a guitarist from Faribault, Minnesota called Dave Miller. Andrew put us in touch with Dave, who picked up the story.

Dave had known about the guitar since 1978, and he recalls that Dan "was an amazing guitar player and he mostly sat when he played, so there were hardly any scratches on the back". A few weeks after buying the guitar, a dealer from the Twin Cities area contacted Dave, bought it from him and sold it on to Andrew Raymond.

That's when the Les Paul crossed the Atlantic and acquired its 'Minnesota' nickname. Although not associated with a famous player, this guitar has previously featured on the cover of a stateside guitar magazine and it's hard to conceive of a better-preserved example of the classic Burst.

Rub through on the neck shows it has been well played, but this guitar didn't suffer through the 60s and has never been subjected to any major modifications. Inside the control cavity, the wiring has remained untouched since the day it left the Gibson factory.

THIS GUITAR DIDN'T SUFFER THROUGH THE 60S AND HAS NEVER BEEN SUBJECTED TO ANY MODIFICATIONS

The colour is incredibly vibrant, and the edges of the sunburst are a deep reddish brown that is considerably mellower and richer than later 'tomato soup' Bursts. The original frets were the earlier narrow type and were very worn. Soon after buying Minnesota, Andrew had a refret done using wider NOS 50s wire from the Gibson factory.

The only parts that have been changed are the tuners. The originals had become too stiff – probably through under-use rather than over-use – and some of the buttons had started to disintegrate. Fortunately, they're tucked away for posterity inside the original case and Minnesota now has a set of Uncle Lou replicas. The headstock was never drilled for cast tuners.

Over the years, Andrew Raymond has very kindly allowed us to examine and play some extraordinarily special vintage instruments from Lucky Fret Music Co's stock. Among them have been several Bursts and the '57 Goldtop we featured in a 2015 of *TGM*. This has taught us that while vintage Les Pauls have common features and traits, they tend to have distinct personalities, too.

For some of the team, Minnesota is the pick of the bunch for its lightness, full but comfy neck profile, easy playing feel and its sweet, almost semi-solid tone. However, Andrew >

The lacquer checking tends to form in lines going across the grain. Minnesota's checking is a classic example

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Minnesota retains an extraordinary depth of colour. The figuring is very distinctive with wide flames and grain lines that converge at the centre joint

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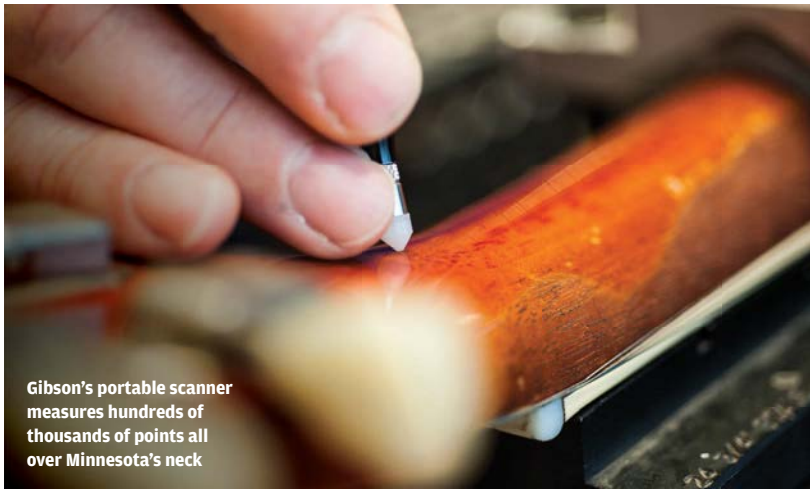
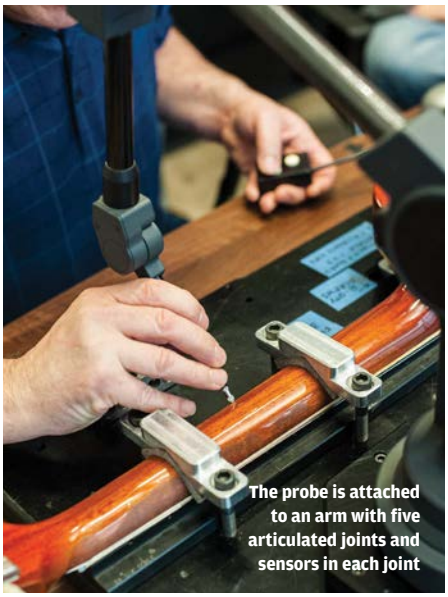
Matthew is using the slick plastic probe to scan the transition from the neck into the headstock curve


Gibson's portable scanner measures hundreds of thousands of points all over Minnesota's neck


The probe is attached to an arm with five articulated joints and sensors in each joint

Once all the neck and headstock readings have been completed further measurements are taken outside the frame

prefers one of his other Bursts and when Joe Bonamassa paid a recent visit, he wasted little time in selecting Andrew's main squeeze to play at a concert in Cardiff. It illustrates that even among holy grails, players' tastes differ. We all have different ideas about what constitutes 'better'.

When Andrew told us about Gibson's plans for a Minnesota replica, we decided to take the opportunity to follow the production processes for Collector's Choice models from the initial appraisal and examination through the prototyping stages and onto the final production version. Along the way, we learned about the amount of work and attention to detail that goes into creating these guitars. If you thought the Collector's Choice series was just a clever marketing ploy, prepare to reconsider your views...

Spearheaded by Gibson Historic Program manager Edwin Wilson, Collector's Choice models are made from select woods, and the quantity of available timber with the appropriate grain and figuring determines the number produced. Hide glue is used for the tops and the neck joint, rather than the Titebond used elsewhere in the Custom Shop,

MINNESOTA IS STRAPPED ONTO A FRAME ON A LARGE TABLE, READY FOR THE NECK SCANNING PROCESS TO BEGIN

and it's preferred for its strength and vibration transfer properties.

Stretching over the best part of a year, this project took us from the heartlands of rural Wales to London, Nashville and eventually back to Wales. Gibson starts the process by scanning the instrument destined for Collector's Choice treatment, and for that we headed to London.

London Calling

On a fine February morning, we find ourselves sipping coffee with Andrew, Edwin and Historic Program luthier Matthew Klein at Gibson's West London HQ. Alongside us are three 1950s 'Cali Girl' cases, two of which contain '59 Les Pauls. On a large table, Minnesota is strapped onto a frame ready for its neck to be scanned. In Gibson's Nashville facility, the company uses a laser scanner, but the 'travelling system' is being used today. Matthew explains how it works: "The arm has five elbow joints and a slick plastic probe that touches the surface of the guitar. The system notes the position of each elbow joint, so each reading is analysed relative to a 'home' position. The system works it all out to determine the exact position of the sensor and the positional information is fed into a computer program that draws out a 3D representation of the neck.

"It measures thousands of points. For instance, just on one half of the heel I have 15,000 measurement points. It's not absolutely necessary to have that many, but if I leave here and there's an issue or a flat spot shows up, I'll have to fly all the way back to the UK to do this again. We clean up the surface of the scan in the computer to get rid of any 'noise' or outlying points, then generate CNC machining code." >

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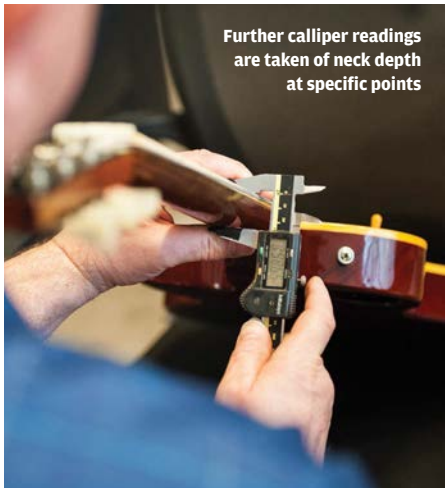
Edwin measures the DC resistance of the pickups with the black tip on a ground point and the red tip on the input tag of the volume pot. This ensures the readings aren't skewed by the controls



Further calliper readings are taken of neck depth at specific points

We ask if machine-carved necks are indistinguishable from the originals, and Matthew assures us they are: "The only areas that can deviate with our processes are the transitions. It's very easy to knock a corner off with even the finest sandpaper and change the character, but so far as the playing surface, heel and back of the headstock are concerned it's correct.

"The difficulty is if a corner is too sharp the buffing machines will rub through the lacquer, but if it's too rounded it won't look like a Gibson.

"The level of accuracy is mind-blowing because it can pick up dimples that are less that half a thousandth of an inch. We can take a similar approach with the top carve if it's going to be a feature of that model. Like Billy Gibbons' Pearly Gates for example, because it has a pronounced shape on the edge."

Having been impressed with Gibson's fastidious approach to neck profiling, we wonder if other aspects of the builds receive as much attention. Since most of the original Bursts were lighter than later ones, does Gibson shoot for a vintage-correct weight? Edwin selects and buys the wood, so he gives us some insights. "Most of the stuff we're doing now is very light mahogany, and part of that is the fact that it comes from Fiji as opposed to South America," he says. "It's classified as a true mahogany, but it's actually quite a bit lighter than Honduras. We use hand-picked Indian rosewood for the fingerboards. We don't pick wood out on how it sounds and feels when you cut it, but as long as it is vibrant and it amplifies when you touch it, it's good."

The Collector's Choice models are replicas of old, and well-played instruments, so Gibson uses a variety of techniques to achieve an authentically aged look. Edwin kindly shares some secrets with us: "We'll oxidise the wood using chemicals that are common in the woodworking industry, and the lacquer checking is done with razor blades. Although Fender is starting to do some razor stuff, over the years they've mostly sprayed something called airplane lacquer, and it dries incredibly hard. Then they'll use compressed air to crack it. The problem is it shatters the lacquer, and that's not realistic-looking for us. From the very first guitars Tom Murphy started working on, it has been all about recreating the look of an aged Gibson, and the only way you can do that really is with a razor."

ACCORDING TO EDWIN WILSON, MINNESOTA'S NECK HUMBUCKER "COULD BE THE HOTTEST PAF EVER"

While we're chatting, Matthew finishes off the surprisingly long and thorough scanning procedure and hands Minnesota back to Edwin for further measurements while he backs up the data. In contrast, Edwin's approach is reassuringly analogue and old-school, as he takes careful measurements all over Minnesota's neck and body and writes down everything down in a notebook with a trusty ball-point pen.

Part of the documentation process involves Edwin removing Minnesota's control cover and taking readings of the pickups. The results are surprising, with the bridge pickup reading a fairly standard 7.59k but the neck topping the scale at a whopping 8.8k. According to Edwin, it "could be the hottest PAF ever". This leads into a discussion about current production PAF replicas and capacitors, which are clearly subjects close to Edwin's heart.

"Usually, what I'll do on these lines is measure the output of the pickup and use >

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CC models are generally replicas of instruments in their current condition. Minnesota has been refretted with late-'59 spec Gibson fretwire, which is slightly wider than what it left the factory with

The second prototype's flame isn't as vivid as the production model's, but Gibson went a bit heavier on the relicing

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One of the Collector's Choice #39 production models on the bench at Gibson Custom in Nashville

whatever's closest to that. Most of them end up being Custom Buckers. When we did the Jimmy Page model, that was the first time we made a specific pickup for a guitar. I asked him if he wanted the same pickups used in the '91 model and he said those were the worst pickups ever. He hated those things. So I measured his vintage pickups, and I wound something that was similar to what his guitar sounds like currently.

"So our Custom Buckers are loosely based on the pickups I made for him. The coils are mismatched and they're unpotted, but the output is a little different. The range we use goes from about 7.6k to about 8.3k. The tone capacitors, currently, are not paper and oil, we're using mylar and foil caps that are really high-quality but in a bumblebee shell and wired 50s-style off the output of the volume pot. I've been working with a vendor on some paper and oil ones for a year or so. We're close, but we're not quite there yet."

As he's looking at the computer scan, Matthew calls us over to check out something remarkable. Looking at a cross-section at the first fret, he reveals that Minnesota's neck is symmetrical to within 0.25mm. Considering that all vintage Gibson necks were hand-carved, it demonstrates a breathtaking degree of skill. "There was great consistency too,"

EDWIN'S APPROACH IS REASSURINGLY ANALOGUE AS HE TAKES MEASUREMENTS ALL OVER MINNESOTA'S NECK AND BODY

Matthew explains. "Some of the necks were absolutely identical. I tried a Rick Nielsen template on a different neck that we were copying and it could only have been made by the same guy."

In recent years, a sizeable aftermarket replica parts industry has developed. Gibson is fully aware of this and Edwin has been instrumental in raising the company's game in this regard. Gibson is now making many of its own parts, and they're more vintage-accurate than ever before. After all, it's a point of pride because Gibson designed and made the parts in the first place. Edwin takes us through the recent changes.

"The tailpiece is aluminium and it was the first vintage part we reissued. Since then, we've done the bridges and saddles. We buy in our machineheads, but in 2015 we re-tooled our pickup covers, the plastics and everything. From doing the tailpiece in 2000, we decided that we wouldn't guess anymore about what the parts should look like or what they were made out of. So we got original parts and copied them. We even have the materials analysed in a lab, because that sort of information doesn't really exist at Gibson in the engineering notes.

"Lou Gatanas, of Uncle Lou's Classic Guitars, and I worked really hard together on the plastics, pickup covers and the parts. So from 2015, the switch tips have been Catalin and the flat plastics are ABS, like the originals. We did 3D scans of a set of original pickup rings and they're butyrate like the knobs. The knobs are hand-painted and the gold on them is the same gold that we use on our Goldtops, just like Gibson did in the 50s. They'll even fluoresce under black light.

"All the flat plastics are laminated, so the pickguard is actually six-ply, and to find a company in the US that would laminate ABS was amazingly difficult. Nobody does that anymore. Eventually, we found a company that still had its old tooling, and they agreed >

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Note the colour contrast between the pickguard and the pickup ring on Minnesota

Minnesota's poker chip has faded lettering, and you can see tooling marks at the edge

The poker chip on the production model has no lettering, but the edges are authentically rough and its made of the right material

Gibson's plastic parts are closer to the originals than ever, but they'll need some playing time to achieve the same patina as Minnesota

to try. It took them about six months to figure out how to do it again. So now they do the pickguards, the four-ply jack plates and the three-ply toggle washer."

With that, we're done for the day. The guys explain that back at the Gibson factory, Matthew will take responsibility for programming the CNC machine, prototyping the neck and ironing out bugs. Eventually, a prototype will be put together and shipped to Andrew for comments and approval. We wonder about the timescale.

"Right now, we have a lot of guitars that are documented and on the schedule," Edwin tells us, "But that doesn't mean that Minnesota won't go into production this year. Say I'm on a wood-buying trip and I come across 150 tops that look like Minnesota's, this guitar will move straight to the front of the line."

Prototypes & Production

Edwin and Matthew fly back to Nashville the following day and the waiting begins. At this point, none of us has any idea how long it will take or even when the first prototype will materialise. Fortunately, everything happens quickly, and by early May 2016 the prototype has arrived. Andrew gives us the call, and it's a classic case of 'close but no cigar'. On the plus side, the first prototype's neck is a dead ringer for Minnesota's and has a similarly lightweight and easy-playing feel. In fact, it plays just as nicely as the original with a very similar acoustic voice.

The most obvious difference between the real thing and first prototype is that the outer edges of the sunburst are too red and 'tomato soup-y', and the binding isn't yellow enough. We also notice that Gibson hasn't replicated the wear on the bass side of the neck. Photos are taken, emails are written and Andrew sends our feedback off to Nashville.

Edwin clearly got lucky on a timber-buying trip soon after and we didn't have to wait too long for Minnesota to go into production after all. *TGM* editor Chris Vinnicombe paid the Gibson Custom factory a visit while he was in Nashville covering Summer NAMM in June 2016, where there were Minnesota Bursts in final assembly that very day. By July, Collector's Choice #39 had hit the shops and Andrew had taken possession of prototype number two and the very first model to roll off the production line.

Hands On

Although we now turn our attention to the production model, what follows differs slightly from a regular review. We always assess build quality, playing experience, tone, aesthetic appeal, and we'll cover those same bases here. However, the crucial difference is that the production model will be judged against the guitar it's purported to replicate, as well as on its own merits.

This begs the question 'is it fair to compare a £7,599 guitar with one that's worth about as much as a suburban semi-detached house?'. We think it's justified because all of the raw materials that went into making Les Pauls back in the 1950s are still available. The vertigo-inducing value of vintage Les Pauls actually comes from their association with seminal recordings and their extreme rarity rather than solid gold hardware, diamond inlays or other such exotica.

You might say that it's all about the tone, because it's popularly imagined that age has somehow 'seasoned' the original instruments. But we're not convinced that's a valid argument. The Les Pauls that Peter Green, Eric Clapton and Mike Bloomfied played in the 60s were less than a decade old, yet the records are proof they sounded incredible. Besides which, there are plenty of 70s guitars that sound just as dull and lifeless now as they did when new. Age alone guarantees nothing. If the Beano Burst resurfaced tomorrow, we're not convinced it would sound better now than it did 50 years ago.

You could get into minutiae such as neck profiles, weight and appearance and you'd be on safer ground. The real Bursts we've played have knocked our socks off – not because of their value but because they feel utterly fantastic and the PAF pickups from that era have never been bettered. Of course, the patina and historic significance intensifies >

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MINNESOTA

KEY FEATURES

MINNESOTA

- **BUILD** One-piece Honduran mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with celluloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Uncle Lou replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two original double white PAF pickups measuring 8.8k (neck) 7.59k (bridge), original 500k pots, paper/oil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.75mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at ninth fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37.5mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.2lbs/3.7kg

PROTOTYPE #2

KEY FEATURES

PROTOTYPE #2

- **BUILD** One-piece Fijian mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Indian rosewood fingerboard with pearloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Kluson Deluxe replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two Custom Bucker PAF replica pickups measuring 8.5k (neck) 7.86k (bridge), 500k pots, mylar/foil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22mm at first fret, 24mm at ninth fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36.5mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.65lbs/3.92Kg

PRODUCTION MODEL

KEY FEATURES

COLLECTOR'S CHOICE #39

- **BUILD** One-piece Fijian mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Indian rosewood fingerboard with pearloid markers and 22 frets, holly peghead overlay
- **HARDWARE** No-wire ABR-1 Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium tailpiece, Kluson Deluxe replica tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Two Custom Bucker PAF replica pickups measuring 8.42k (neck) 7.94k (bridge), 500k pots, mylar/foil bumblebee capacitors, three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.61"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.75mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.5mm at first fret, 24.5mm at ninth fret, 25mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.7lbs/3.94kg

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Gibson has nailed the brownish red around the edges of the burst on this production model

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The neck wear has been replicated on the treble side but not the bass side

Minnesota is in such great condition you can count the chips to its top on one hand

the thrill, but they're sublime guitars because of the way they were made in the first place, not because of the way they've aged.

There is no longer as much mystery about 50s Les Pauls, because every single aspect of their construction has been analysed and understood. Gibson has all the resources, materials and personnel it needs to make Les Pauls in the 21st century that are every bit as good as the 50s ones. That's why we're not going to fawn all over Minnesota and we're not going to pull any punches on the production model. Let's start by examining how the looks of the production model compare with Minnesota's.

Gibson certainly nailed the sunburst, and the figuring closely resembles Minnesota's. Short of applying a photo transfer on the production models, it couldn't have got much closer given the vagaries of natural materials. The edge shade is really quite remarkable, but the centre is just a tad yellower and the binding a bit lighter on the production model. Minnesota's clear coats are more amber, but a few hours' sunbathing would surely help the production model to close the gap. Although restrained, it has extra lacquer checking that's more obvious. Minnesota's checking can be seen only from certain angles, just like its flames, which Gibson has got just right. Without stain to make the grain pop, the top can look quite plain from some angles, then as you twist it and the light bounces from a different angle, the flames leap right out. This pseudo-holographic effect is a hallmark of the real deal, and clearly Gibson can still deliver the goods.

The company has replicated the wear pattern on the treble side but not the bass side of the neck, so that aspect of our feedback must have got lost somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. There's a large lacquer-free patch, and the wood feels as if it has a protective coating with a slightly greyed-up look to simulate oxidised timber. Minnesota has more dark/light contrast between the middle and end areas of the neck, but the deep cherry colour looks gorgeous and the restrained ageing on the back is confined to lacquer checking and a few minor dents. This is in keeping with the original, which is in great shape and has no buckle rash.

Although the production model's plastics and hardware show minimal signs of distress, Minnesota's original knobs appear virtually new and the hardware is only a good buff-up away from looking the same. Visually, Gibson has done an impressive job, and although on close inspection the production model looks aged rather than genuinely old, there were still several comedy moments during photography when we had to check the serial numbers to distinguish Minnesota from the prototype and production model.

In Use

Moving on to the overall feel, it's really no exaggeration to state that if blindfolded and handed all three guitars in turn, we don't believe we could tell which was which from the neck profiles alone. Although the measurements might reveal minute differences, the necks are for all practical purposes, identical. The guitars also feel very similar, with a nicely worn-in quality and slinky, easy-bending action.

When we begin playing, subtle differences begin to manifest. Acoustically, Minnesota falls bang in the middle between the second prototype and the production model, with a meaty low-mid growl, slightly recessed >

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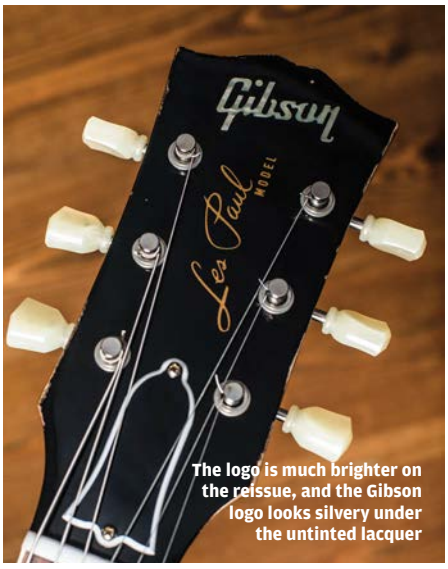
This is exactly how Minnesota left the factory. The bumblebees are the original paper in oil types, too

Minnesota's Les Paul logo has faded, while the ambered clear coats give the logo a golden look



The logo is much brighter on the reissue, and the Gibson logo looks silvery under the untinted lacquer

The production guitar's wiring looks very similar to the original, but the bumblebee caps are the modern mylar foil types

mids and airy treble. The prototype has the airy treble quality without the growl, while the production model does the low-midrange thing without the wide-open treble chime. Minnesota also has a resonant and almost semi-solid quality, with very long sustain. Single notes played high up the neck sound sweet and have a lot of body behind them.

The production model has a fatter midrange tone than the prototype and, like Minnesota, it combines fat but crisp low notes with tons of sustain but not quite as much twang. If we were reviewing the production model on its own, we'd be over the moon with it because it's an outstanding Les Paul that more than holds its own with the vintage examples we've played.

The prototype sounds a tiny bit closer to Minnesota unplugged, with slightly scooped mids and a more delicately nuanced treble. But we're really splitting hairs because all three have outstanding natural tone. And while they all sound different, we can't identify any one of them as being clearly superior to the others.

We've dwelled on the playing feel and acoustic tone of the guitars here because there's nothing much you can do to improve those, and we're pleased to report that the production model passes with flying colours. It is perhaps all too predicable that Minnesota gets its nose in front when amplifiers are involved, so given the extreme similarities in playing feel and acoustic tone, the focus of attention shifts to the pickups.

The production model has a muscular, aggressive midrange but it's comparatively rolled off in the deep lows and upper harmonics. Nevertheless, these pickups have a very articulate bite with a discernible bloom,

THE PRODUCTION MODEL HAS A MUSCULAR, AGGRESSIVE MIDRANGE AND CLEANS UP WITHOUT LOSING CLARITY

but the ethereal shifting harmonic thing synonymous with original PAFs doesn't quite happen, perhaps because the 'air' frequencies in question aren't really there.

The Custom Buckers clean up without losing clarity, but you can't get them to do woody jazziness, jangle or a 'Tele on steroids' trick. The production model has more of a cocked wah rock voicing, whereas Minnesota is a better all-rounder that's thicker, clearer, brighter, more dynamic and versatile. The production model would be a stellar guitar for a rock gig, but Minnesota could get you through a set of covers, blues standards or even a jazz engagement.

The Custom Buckers are just as good as many of the boutique PAF pretenders we've tried. There are a handful of PAF replicas that sound closer to original 50s units – we discovered that installing a set of Monty's PAFs can send the sonic performance of a Collector's Choice Les Paul into the stratosphere when working on a friend's Greg Martin Collector's Choice #15.

Considering their price, you might argue that owners shouldn't be obliged to 'upgrade' Collector's Choice instruments at all. However, the point is that they're not. Without the original Minnesota and the Monty-fied Greg Martin on hand to compare, it's doubtful that we would feel anything was missing here. It was certainly worth the wait, but is it worth the money? If you can afford it, you could consider this model either an expensive option or a substantial saving. Either way, it looks, feels and sounds like the real deal, and it's every ounce a real Gibson. It seems they do make 'em like they used to after all.

Special thanks to Andrew Raymond and Lucky Fret Music for making this feature possible. Visit the store online at www.luckyfret.com to see a fine collection of vintage and new instruments on sale.

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BENCH TEST

Raising The Standard

There are times when an instrument is so wonderful that staying appropriately dispassionate can be a challenge. With that in mind, this 1960 Les Paul Standard is a test for more than just the guitar. Huw Price feels fit to burst...

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The top is a uniform amber except in those areas shielded from light by the poker chip, pickup rings and pickguard where traces of the sunburst remain

1960 GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD

- **PRICE** £219,995
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with set mahogany neck, bound rosewood fingerboard, celluloid markers and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Gibson Deluxe tuners, wireless ABR-1 bridge, aluminium tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** 2x PAF humbuckers
- **FINISH** Nitrocellulose
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.63"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43.35mm at nut, 52.61mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.5mm at first fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.96mm at nut, 51.31mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4.45kg/9.81lbs
- **CONTACT** Lucky Fret Music Co 0207 729 9186 **www.luckyfret.com**

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The area adjacent to the fingerboard displays playwear from Doug's plectrum

Though it has had a refret, a decent job was made of it and the guitar plays flawlessly

Few of us will ever get the chance to play a real 1950s sunburst Les Paul – and even those who've been lucky enough to hold one in their hands will probably have had it whisked away after a minute or two by understandably twitchy owners or shop managers. But getting to spend a whole week playing an original Burst unsupervised, through our favourite amps? That's a once in a lifetime opportunity, and thanks to Lucky Fret Music Co in London, it's one that we're delighted to share with you today.

Not all 1960 Bursts were created equal and 'Double 00' examples such as this, which precede the 07 models made later in the year, were reputedly built with leftover 1959 bodies and necks, and finished in the earlier non-lightfast finish. Consequently, the neck isn't skinny, there are no 'reflector' knobs and the front is about as far as it gets from the divisive 'tomato soup' sunburst. Even so, a vivid red colour remains under the pickguard and it can also be seen under the poker chip and the pickup rings.

Early 1960 Les Pauls were reputedly built with leftover 1959 bodies and necks

Photos from 1972 clearly show that most, if not all, of the shaded areas had already faded away by then and, since the previous owner Doug Lock (see Locked And Loaded, p106), played with the pickguard off, the un-faded area is vivid even in black and white. The front isn't short of patina and in Burst parlance, this example qualifies as an 'unburst'. None of the shading remains visible and what's left is a uniform deep amber colour with subtle tints of orange and an even subtler hint of green.

Lacquer checking is extensive and is most apparent across the face of the flame-free maple top. The nitrocellulose retains a deep all-over gloss, but the surface texture looks subtly different around the controls, with a hint of orange peel. >

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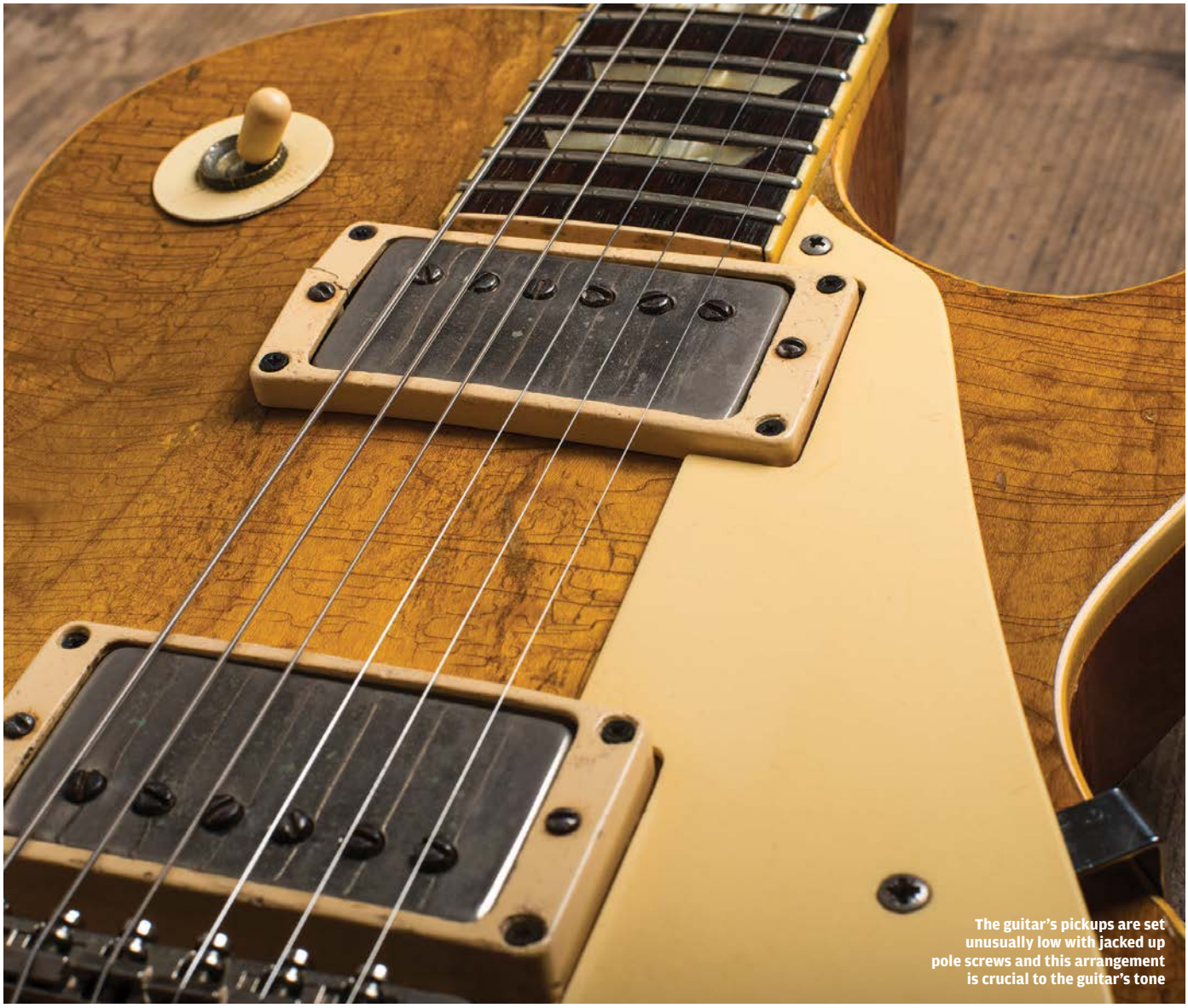
The guitar's pickups are set unusually low with jacked up pole screws and this arrangement is crucial to the guitar's tone

Four screw holes from a long gone Bigsby B5 have been plugged and lacquered over. In addition, there are two tight crack lines running across the pot shaft holes of the neck pickup controls. Under black light the entire top glows, but it's slightly darker in the area around the screw holes and the controls. We might conclude that the area in question has had a light blow-over.

The back of the neck blacklights nicely, too, but we are informed it was also sprayed over at some point. However, the added lacquer has since been cut back across the neck's playing area and given the sheer quantity of original lacquer that survives, it's a mystery why anybody decided to overspray it in the first place.

There are some fairly deep and wide lacquer cracks running across the back of the neck, so it may have been an attempt to smooth out the feel. In that sense, the blow-over succeeds and the non-original lacquer shows up as deep and clear infills between the missing areas of cherry, with oxidised mahogany beneath. The same can be seen in various spots around the rear body edges.

A vivid verdigris is apparent on the control knobs, one of which is slightly deformed in a way that suggests heat was involved. The neck pickup ring is cracked, but remains fully functional and the original pickguard is back on, albeit with a Pozidriv bracket screw.

With its soft-shouldered '59 neck profile, it's hard to imagine a better playing Burst

Although the wireless ABR-1 bridge appears original, almost 60 years of string pressure has forced it into a slight downwards bend and the saddles all look a bit fresh. The aluminium tailpiece is a replacement, but it's a vintage Gibson wrapover bridge with the intonation grub screws removed.

Inside the control cavity, the routing and the characteristic router marks appear as expected. The tone caps are Astron metal foil types in ceramic housings with green lettering and these are often seen in 1960s LPs rather than the earlier Mylar bumblebees. Nothing suggests the solder joints have been touched – hence our unwillingness to pull everything out to read pot codes.

Previous owner, the producer Terry Thomas, reveals that the guitar was once fitted with Grovers, but the enlarged post holes have been expertly plugged and re-drilled. The Kluson-style tuners currently on the guitar are labelled Gibson Deluxe and they were made in Japan. They have the appearance of age and with Uncle Lou single-ring buttons, they look the part.

IN USE

All the 1950s and very early 1960s Gibson solidbodies that we've played sound intriguing

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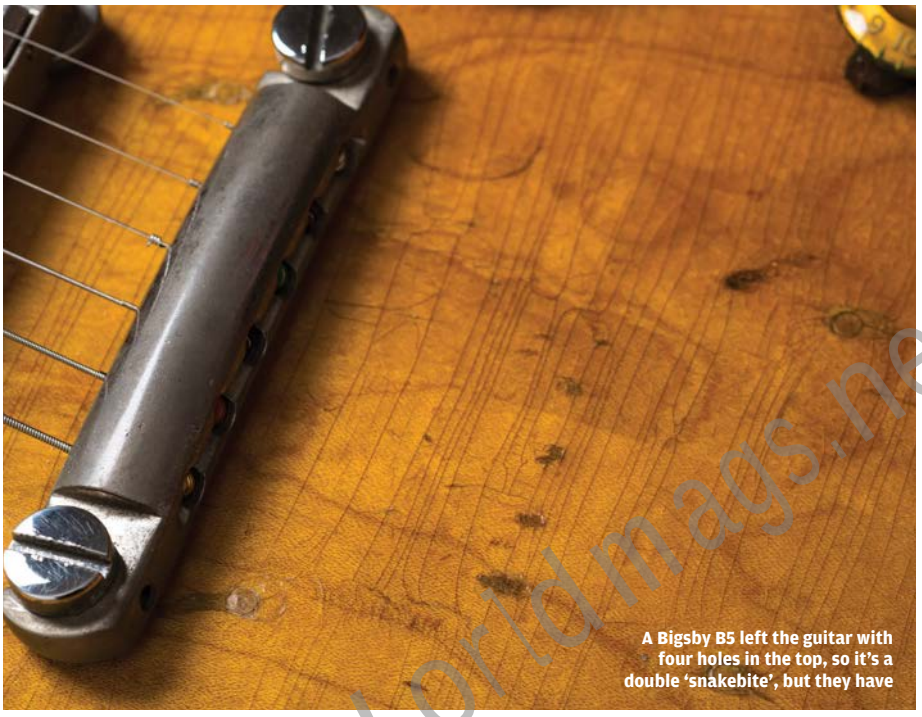
Early photos of Doug playing the '60 show a missing switch tip, but he soon found this replacement

when played unplugged and this instrument is no exception. Addressing Les Paul Standards specifically, we've noticed variations that appear to correlate with body weight.

At the risk of veering into gross generalisation, lighter Les Pauls tend to be louder than heavier ones, with an airier sprang, faster response and deeper lows. On the flipside, weightier LPs often resonate with more midrange emphasis, tighter lows, softer treble, a smoother attack and sometimes longer sustain. Irrespective of weight, we always hear a resonance peak in the lower region of the upper mids that produces a woody growl suggestive of 'acoustic overdrive' with certain note combinations.

This 1960 falls on the heavier side of the vintage spectrum and conforms to our expectations for a weighty vintage Les Paul. It bears a closer resemblance to a lovely 1955 P-90-loaded Goldtop we got to grips with a couple of years back than it does with a slightly later PAF-equipped 1957 model, for example. The '55 had a similar weight, yet it >



A Bigsby B5 left the guitar with four holes in the top, so it's a double 'snakebite', but they have

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Doug Lock (far left) on stage with Bulldozer

LOCKED AND LOADED

The name 'Duggie Lock' is stencilled on the Cali Girl case that comes with the guitar. Having previously belonged to Luther Grosvenor (aka Ariel Bender), this Les Paul was given to Doug Lock as a 21st birthday present in June 1971. He played it in various groups, including an obscure early 1970s British rock band called Bulldozer. There are two videos on YouTube that are merely collections of still photographs, but you can see and hear him playing this very guitar.

Bulldozer were managed by Ten Years After drummer Ric Lee and while recording at Escape Studios in Kent, the band was interrupted by the roar of a hot-rod pulling into the driveway, driven by none other than Jeff Beck. Beck quickly spotted Doug's Les Paul and said, "Nice axe, man." Soon after Beck began playing it. Doug fled the room exclaiming, "I can't handle this!" but his bandmates continued jamming, with Beck using Doug's guitar throughout.

Having also played with The Graham Bond Organisation, Doug was obviously no slouch on guitar himself and his bandmate Derek Carter describes him as "a proper blues player". However, when his musical career didn't take off, he became a guitar tech for Frank Zappa, Steve Winwood, Bad Company and Jimmy Page. Doug recalled that Page's first words to him were, "You're going to have to anticipate when I break a string". He also tour-managed for Motörhead and worked as a guitar tech for The Moody Blues with his voice featuring on *Under My Feet* and his offstage acoustic playing bolstering live performances.

After contracting pneumonia in the early 1990s, Doug and his long-time partner Joy Arnold relocated to Ireland. The Les Paul was sold to help finance new ventures and Doug soon developed successful sidelines as a guesthouse owner and fly-fishing instructor. As a member of the Rock And Roll Fly Fishers Club, he even got to cast with Eric Clapton.

Doug stayed on in Cork after Joy succumbed to cancer but in 2010, Doug also died. His friend Joani wrote the following. "He played the slide like the devil but unfortunately sang like a cat trapped in a door and when the amp was turned up to 11, I put on my wellies and took the dogs for a really long walk! I could still hear him at the top of our land."

Doug once offered some words of wisdom to one of his guitar students, but they might apply to any of us. "You've got some good chops there but speed ain't everything. Imagine you are talking to someone through the guitar, you have to stop and take a breath or you'll pass out. The notes you don't play can speak just as loud as the ones you do." We would have loved to have shared a Guinness or two with Duggie Lock.

Special thanks to Derek Carter, Pete Isaacs, Chuck Lock, Gail Kirkham and Jeremiah Healy

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Inside the cutaway there's extensive lacquer checking and the maple layer below the binding is clearly visible

was unusually resonant – like that guitar, this can be felt vibrating where it rests against your body.

However valuable they may be, not all vintage guitars play well. Often this can be attributed to a setup that's long overdue or frets being worn out. This guitar's previous owner bought it to play, and had it refretted soon after. A pretty decent job was done and the fingerboard is in superb condition. Couple that with the soft shouldered depth of a fattish '59 neck profile and rock-solid tuning, and it's hard to imagine a better playing Burst.

Past experience teaches us to look for certain sonic characteristics in vintage Les Pauls and the 1960 doesn't disappoint in that regard. Through a clean amp, you get tremendous clarity, uncanny sustain, ever shifting harmonics and touch dynamics that can rival the finest acoustics. What's more, the controls behave as expected, cleaning up from the volume controls and rolling off treble from the tone controls without loss of clarity or definition.

However long we spend playing this, it keeps surprising us with different sounds

Having ticked all of the fundamental Burst boxes, this guitar also has a very distinctive voice. It's less bright than some 1950s Les Pauls, as the 1960 channels its acoustic characteristics through heavily patinated double-black PAFs.

This Les Paul's magic is found mostly in the midrange, but the sheer variety in the tones that it produces is astonishing. In large part this is due to a pronounced sonic contrast between the pickups. That classic 'cocked wah' midrange resonance is most apparent on the bridge pickup, and the Standard combines this with a mellow sparkle and more than a hint of twang.

Picking single notes across a chord, the clarity of each note is something special, and yet everything gels together. Swap the plastic for a spot of fingerpicking and the warm cluck at the front of each note sounds >

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Wiring in the control cavity appears largely untouched, with correct-for-1960 Astron metal foil capacitors and the original control pots

Overspray on the headstock has checked, so there's fresh checking over vintage checking

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The neck pickup ring was split before Doug acquired the guitar, but over four decades later it's still holding firm

not unlike Merle Travis playing away on his famous Bigsby guitar.

We've often remarked on the P-90-like qualities of genuine PAFs, but this bridge pickup comes closer than any we have tried to the throaty growl and wiry snarl of Gibson's greatest single coil. Going head-to-head with a '54 Goldtop, the PAF sounds a tad brighter and more complex while the P-90 is more direct – however, differences between the alnico magnets should also be considered.

If you want prettiness or jazzy warmth, switch to the neck. Here the midrange resonance is far less pronounced and treble extends further, so it's closer to our previous experience with PAFs and the finest replicas. Notes are rounder, woodiness abounds and fast runs have an effortless fluidity. Single-note attack is livelier and it's a rare thing to find this level of mellow refinement combined with such superb bass definition.

The in-between setting has the most pronounced contrast we've ever heard on a Les Paul. Often you're obliged to go looking for hollow and honky phasiness in the mids by balancing the volumes or even adjusting pickup height to zone in on the elusive quack point. This guitar hands it to you on a plate.

Overdrive can have a homogenising effect on guitars, masking subtle tonal characteristics, smoothing out quirks and compensating for a lack of sustain. With this guitar, the opposite occurs because an overdriven valve amp actually accentuates the clean characteristics. The bridge's growl becomes a snarl and then a full-blown roar. Meanwhile, the neck's vocal 'aaah' becomes a singing 'oooh' with a sweetly shimmering bite at the front of each note.

It transpires that the complex harmonic overtones we associate with PAFs are in there, and overdrive merely helps to draw them out. Remember that the Les Paul was designed for jazz and although this 1960 is a consummate clean guitar, its sheer grunt and strength through a cranked valve amp inspires awe.

The elephant in the room is of course, the cost of taking it home. This guitar was recently sold by Lucky Fret Music Co, and as you'd expect, the ticket was north of 200 grand. There's a vast gulf in price between Gibson's finest current offerings and a vintage Burst but this has more to do with their scarcity – and the paradigm-shifting recordings of players such as Bloomfield, Clapton and Kossoff – than Fabergé-like craftsmanship or vast differences in the quality of materials and playability.

Whether we approve of the cost of this guitar or not is immaterial – vintage Les Pauls have long since become investment goods and are valued accordingly. The difference at this level is that the market decides a guitar's >

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Besides a small patch of buckle rash, the back retains most of its original lacquer, although like the neck, it has been stabilised by a blowover

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It would take years to truly get to know this guitar, and it's difficult to imagine a more inspiring musical instrument

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Repro machineheads with Uncle Lou tips have been added, but the guitar was previously fitted with Grovers

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The verdigris on all four control knobs is a particularly vibrant shade of green

worth rather than the would-be owner's bank manager or significant other.

As such, those who can contemplate buying a real Burst will be well-heeled rock stars, serious collectors and investors – or maybe some combination of all three. For some of these individuals, the value of a vintage Les Paul as a musical instrument or cultural artefact will be secondary at best and the issue is not whether they can afford it, but whether a specific Burst is worth the asking price.

We can justifiably lament the fact that 'ordinary musicians' can no longer afford them. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the Kahler trem retrofits, stripped finishes, shaved necks and added switches inflicted on many vintage Bursts, were performed by well-intentioned 'players' rather than 'evil investors'.

It's consoling that the early Les Pauls that survive will henceforth be treasured and preserved. Like certain antique violins, they may even play and sound just as good when they are three centuries old. Whether guitarists will actually be granted access remains moot.

Is getting your hands on such a great sounding and playing original Burst a life-changing experience? That might be overstating things but our close encounters with these guitars have certainly transformed our understanding and appreciation of the Les Paul Standard as a player's instrument. They are so different from what we expected, and significantly better.

However, at the risk of offending the Burst blowhards, we remain unconvinced that age is the determining factor when it comes to a guitar's tone. This is easily one of the finest electric guitars we've ever played, but if you understand how to combine the right type of hardware and electronic components on a suitable body, it's possible to experience something unnervingly close to vintage Burst tone without having to buy an original. We'll expand on this theme in a future issue!

That said, any player discovering how subtle, complex, versatile, delicate and ferocious these guitars can be, will never again dismiss vintage style Les Pauls as old school blues or rock instruments. However long we spend playing the Duggie Lock Burst, it keeps surprising us with different sounds and new textures. We suspect that it would take months or even years to truly get to know this guitar, and it's difficult to imagine a more inspiring musical instrument.

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REVIEW

Gibson Custom Made 2 Measure 1956 Les Paul Heavy Aged

Will Chris Vinnicombe be helpless to resist this Old Black-inspired electric with the heart of a Goldtop and the damage already done?

As we've seen elsewhere, Gibson Custom has a peerless ability to craft faithful replicas of the timeless guitars that it turned out in the 50s and 60s, but Gibson's artisans do much more than factory-spec Bursts and Goldtops. Gibson Custom's Made 2 Measure program lets you spec your own dream guitar, and it doesn't get much more dreamy or unique than this 1956 Les Paul Heavy Aged. Ordered by Coda Music in Stevenage, this M2M is a stunning – if unofficial – homage to Neil Young's long-serving LP known as 'Old Black'.

Old Black has been heavily modified over the years – believed to be a '53, it was spray-painted black before Young acquired it in a trade from Buffalo Springfield bandmate Jim Messina. A Bigsby tailpiece was already in place in time for the recording of *Cowgirl In The Sand* with Crazy Horse in January 1969, while a Firebird mini-humbucker was added to the bridge position – replacing a short-lived DeArmond Dynasonic – in 1972. Some have speculated that the guitar was re-necked in the 1960s and it has also been modified with a 'direct out' switch to bypass the onboard potentiometers and caps, and hit the front end of the amp as hard as possible.

Lacking both the bypass switch and the aluminium plates on Young's guitar, our review guitar stops short of being a full replica but nevertheless manages to channel the spirit of Old Black within the options offered by the Made 2 Measure process. Rather than being modelled on a '53, it utilises another Goldtop as the 'base' model – the Historic 1956 Les Paul Goldtop Reissue, aka the R6.

Standard 'R6' specifications include a hide-glue neck join, a vintage-correct neck tenon that extends into the neck pickup cavity and a Historic truss-rod assembly with no tubing. The fretwire here is a little fatter than vintage and Gibson's current Bumble Bee tone capacitors aren't the old-school paper-in-oil type, but it seems a little churlish to complain about either transgression when the guitar is a slinky player that sounds very good indeed, but more on that shortly.

This is one of those guitars that encourages you to push the boundaries of your abilities a little harder

The Ebony gloss nitrocellulose finish may not be as gouged and worn as Young's guitar, but there's still extensive faux playing wear here: we have simulated rub-through to the bare wood around the back, in the forearm area on the top and along the fingerboard binding on the treble and bass sides of the neck. When we visited Gibson Custom, we were lucky enough to witness employees hand-ageing instruments (see p58), and while their surprisingly primitive tools and processes can produce results that look a little stylised next to a vintage example, the various dings and razor-cut lacquer checking here makes for an appealing overall look that will bed in nicely when the guitar finds a permanent home and the owner adds some real-life road wear of their own. >

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The Heavy Aged finish features simulated forearm wear and lacquer checking

IN USE

A nicely rounded 50s-style Gibson neck feels like 'home' for this writer, but fans of slimmer profiles shouldn't be intimidated – it's no monster and, in combination with the medium-jumbo fretwire, this is a real joy to play and one of those guitars that encourages you to push the boundaries of your abilities a little harder. Bigbsy sceptics fear not; the proximity of the B7's tension bar to the ABR-1 creates a similar break angle across the bridge to that of a stop tailpiece, while the nylon nut helps reduce friction and keep tuning solid, even with vigorous whammy bar use.

Plugged into a tweed Deluxe and with a Strymon Flint supplying additional ambience it's impossible to resist the pull of cinematic atmospherics in the vein of Young's *Dead Man* soundtrack or the abrasive electric guitar work of Daniel Lanois. There's a world of inspiration here and for the right player it's hard not to lose hours just drinking in the possibilities unlocked by this guitar.

The right amp is key, too. The complex harmonics, easy musical feedback and touch dynamics of a small tweed allow you to go from sweet to savage just by varying picking-hand intensity. Through an amp with a scooped, blackface-style midrange, the mini-humbucker at the bridge can sound a little brash and scratchy, but the chewy mids of a tweed suit it perfectly. Flipping up to the middle or neck settings on the three-way toggle switch introduces an extra helping of bass but we're not talking mud here, there's sugar and cream and it's all very more-ish, particularly with lashings of spring reverb and judicious use of the Bigbsy arm.

The various dings and razor-cut lacquer checking will bed in nicely when its owner adds some real-life road wear

Rolling back the onboard volume controls introduces a hollower, funkier, more Fender-like tonality that works really well for soul-influenced playing. In the middle setting, there's a sweet spot with the bridge pickup's volume set wide open and the neck knocked back around a notch and a half. You can hear the extended bass of the neck pickup take a back seat rather abruptly as you turn down, and the resulting tone is a fantastic, chiming platform for well, almost anything. It rewards the subtlety of fingers rather than a pick, too.

This is almost certainly less cantankerous and easier to handle than the real thing, and you don't have to be a Neil Young devotee to get an awful lot from this bespoke beauty.

GIBSON CUSTOM MADE 2 MEASURE 1956 LES PAUL HEAVY AGED

- **PRICE** £5,699 (inc aged Gibson hard case)
- **DESCRIPTION** Single-cutaway solidbody electric guitar. Made in USA
- **BUILD** Solid mahogany body with maple cap, set mahogany neck with rounded 50s profile and 12-inch radius rosewood fingerboard. 22 medium-jumbo frets. Nylon nut
- **HARDWARE** Kluson Deluxe vintage-style tuners, ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, Bigbsy B7 vibrato tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** Gibson Custom Firebird mini-humbucker (bridge) and soapbar P-90 (neck), three-way toggle pickup selector, 2x volume, 2x tone
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.75"/629mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.6mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.7mm at nut, 25.2mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.9mm at nut, 50.8mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 9.6lbs/4.3kg
- **FINISH** Heavy Aged Ebony nitrocellulose
- **CONTACT** Coda Music 01438 350815 **www.coda-music.com** **www.gibson.com**

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A nylon nut helps keep tuning stable and friction low, even with Bigsby abuse

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BENCH TEST

That Old Black Magic

In 1953, Les Paul asked for a guitar that "looked like a tuxedo", but by the late 60s the Custom had built its own legend. Huw Price gets out a strummer from '69...

The luxurious Les Paul Custom evolved throughout the second half of the 1950s and continued to do so following its reintroduction in 1968. Until 1963, all single- and double-cutaway Custom bodies were made purely mahogany. When the Les Paul Standard acquired two PAF humbuckers in 1957, the Custom got three. Its fingerboard was always ebony to match the black lacquer finish.

For its '68 comeback, the Custom reverted to two humbuckers – by now Patent Number units were de rigeur in Kalamazoo – and the headstock angle was altered from 17 to 14 degrees. The body also finally acquired a maple cap and Gibson attempted to streamline the production process.

During the 1950s, Gibson routed the wiring channels into the mahogany back then glued a mahogany cap on top before routing the control cavity. The top arch was a complicating factor – the base of the control rout had to be angled so that the cap depth was sufficiently thin enough for the control pot shafts to pass through the holes.

In 1968, Gibson began routing the wire channels and the control cavity into the mahogany back before gluing the cap on. According to guitarhq.com, this changed in February 1969, when Gibson reverted to

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The pickup covers were removed at some point in its playing life, which might explain why they're in such good condition

1950s practice and the control cavity has a maple 'step' near the bottom where the depth was altered after gluing the cap.

Shortly afterwards, Gibson introduced the 'pancake' body with a two-layer mahogany back sandwiching a thin layer of maple. By mid '69, headstocks acquired 'made in USA' markings and a volute.

Assuming all this information is accurate, it helps to pin the manufacturing date of this Les Paul Custom down to a fairly specific timeframe. This guitar has the step rout cut into the maple so it was made after January 1969, but there is no evidence of a 'pancake' layer. Furthermore, there is no volute or 'made in USA' stamp. On that basis, this was probably on Gibson's production line sometime between February and May 1969.

The guitar's black lacquer has shrunk sufficiently to reveal a join line in the maple top that's about 15mm to the side of the bass tailpiece post, but it's probably the only part of this guitar that hasn't changed colour since 1969. Much of the gold plating has rubbed off the hardware or picked up verdigris around the edges, the clear coats over the binding have yellowed considerably and by the same process, the pearl inlays on the peghead have acquired a golden hue.

Look closely and you'll see how the Gibson logo evolved from 1952 to 1969 as it migrated north

Look closely and you'll see how the Gibson logo evolved from the 'kissing dot' style of 1952 to the missing dot of 1969 as it migrated northwards away from the tuners. Speaking of which, its machineheads are patinated

1969 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM

- **PRICE** £8,995
- **DESCRIPTION** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in the USA
- **BUILD** Mahogany body with maple cap, set mahogany neck with short tenon joint, bound ebony fingerboard, block markers and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Vintage Kluson tuners, ABR-1 bridge with retaining wire, stop tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Patent Number humbuckers
- **FINISH** Black nitrocellulose
- **SCALE LENGTH** 624mm/24.6"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43.4mm at nut, 52.04mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 21mm at first fret, 25.5mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 5.09mm at nut, 51.93mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4.68kg/10.31lbs
- **CONTACT:** ATB Guitars **www.atbguitars.com**

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The Custom's bound headstock features the 'missing dot' style logo

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The Custom features classic waffle-back Kluson tuners

w o r d a g s . n e t

waffle-back Klusons and paired with its bound headstock, it's a truly classic Gibson look.

The 1950s Les Paul Customs were known as 'fretless wonders' because they were fitted with low frets to attract non-string bending jazz guitarists who wanted easy chording and a fast action. Although the Les Paul was reintroduced at the behest of rockers, Gibson possibly believed the reissue Custom might have jazz appeal. This Custom still has its narrow and low factory frets, so any prospective owner will need to make a decision with regard to playability.

Although currently fitted with a replacement tailpiece, the original will be sold with the guitar. In all other respects the Custom appears entirely original, from its five-ply pickguard to its witch hat knobs, control pots and Sprague Black Beauty tone capacitors. The Patent Number pickups are correct, too, although the covers have been removed at some point – this possibly explains why the gold plating on them has survived so well. The control cavity solder joints appear untouched.

This old road warrior has patina in spades, yet it feels clean, solid and pleasing to play

This old road warrior has patina in spades, yet it feels clean, solid and pleasing to play. A fair amount of finish has worn off the back of the neck, but it's smooth to the touch and it's interesting to observe how Gibson blew the black coats over clear lacquer. You could no doubt lift out some of the stains and ingrained dirt from the finish, but in doing so much of the Custom's appeal and value could be lost.

IN USE

The outline may be much the same, but by 1969 the feel and tone of a Les Paul was very different to that of the legendary Bursts of the late 1950s. There's something hefty, solid and even brutal about this Custom that has an appeal all of its own. Weighing in at over 10lbs and with a neck that's on the chunky side of fat, it's a guitar that requires physical commitment from the player – that is, unless you're a jazzer who gets to perform sitting down, of course!

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By 1969 the feel and tone of a Les Paul was very different to that of the legendary Bursts of the late 1950s

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Acoustically it's fairly resonant, the transients are quite soft and the overall tone has a smooth, fat and compressed quality. There are issues with the G and B string saddles because both strings sound rather muted irrespective of whether they're fretted or played open – happily, this is an easy fix and we note that the bridge has the intonation adjustment screws facing the stop tailpiece. It may seem like the logical way to do it, but when the tailpiece is set close to the body, the sharp break angle can cause the strings to foul against the screw heads, as is the case here.

While we've often marvelled at the unplugged tones of vintage Gibsons, the Custom only comes to life when it's plugged in – but it soon makes up lost ground. This Custom generates a big, powerful and strong sound. The niceties of upper harmonic bloom and touch-sensitive dynamics aren't what this Les Paul is about – instead, the bridge pickup provides solid powerchords with deep and growling lows and a useful resonant cut in the upper mids that enhances definition.

The Custom really comes to life when it's plugged in – with a big, powerful and strong sound

Single notes on the neck pickup have a percussive front end that's more of a robust thump than a stinging slap, before easing into a flutey and pure sustain. Compared to PAF-style 'buckers, these are darker, however they're mellow without being bland and when you match them with high-gain amp settings, it's a complimentary combination for punk, power pop, heavy blues and hard-rock. The old-school Aerosmith sticker on the case is entirely appropriate...

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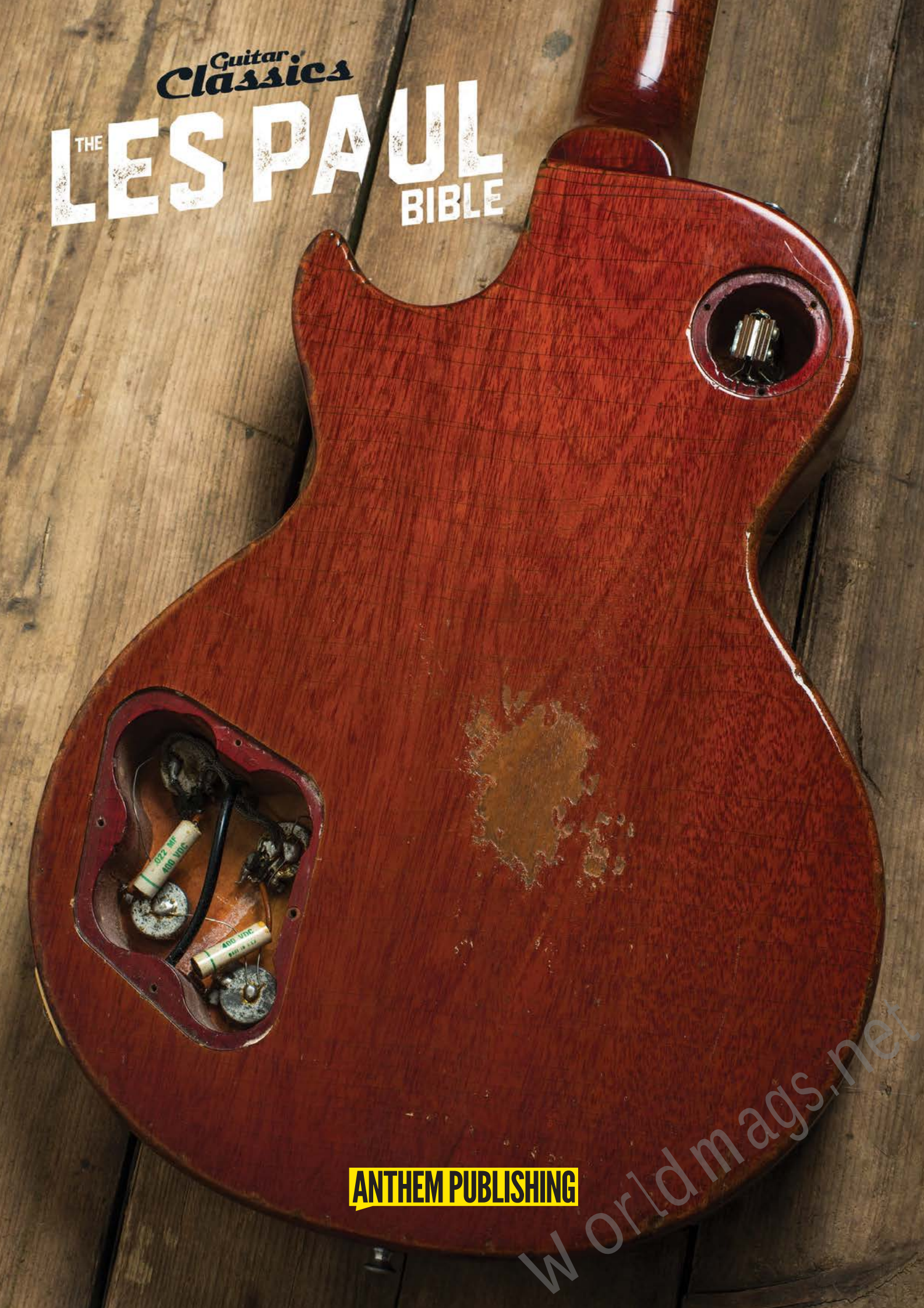

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